

EUGENICS AND THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

EUGENICS, or the "science which deals with the influences which improve the inborn qualities" of an individual has two aspects, which we might designate the positive and the negative. The former is the production of a superior race by breeding only superior persons; the latter is the prevention of an increase of defective people in the population by educating them not to reproduce their defects. Physicians, who by the very nature of their profession are concerned with the physical and mental well-being of the race, should be interested in this movement, which aims at the betterment of the people by such preventive methods.

The positive aspect of Eugenics is particularly applicable to animals, where by proper selection of the mates we can breed a stock which shows the desired qualities to a greater or lesser degree. Certain traits can be eliminated, others emphasized in this manner. The animal breeder does not attempt to raise the general level of the herd by weeding out the poor ones; he strives to create a better strain by breeding only the best. Although it is impossible in the human race to determine which persons are pure for certain desirable qualities, because we cannot know their genetic constitution, nevertheless much may be accomplished in this direction through the education of the race to hunt for their mates among those who show only physical and mental fitness. By repeatedly choosing only those who are desirable as parents, we will not be able to breed geniuses, it is true, but we can produce a race that shows a higher average.

Unfortunately, there are those who con-

demn the entire eugenic programme, because it is impossible to create at will a race of superior people, for as experience has shown, by no means all the progeny of gifted people are gifted to the same degree, if at all. Moreover they advance the argument that one cannot control the curious mental reaction of "falling in love." Merely because we cannot produce geniuses is no reason why we should not strive to produce normal, healthy people. As to the latter objection, we can mention the fact that education in this respect will do a great deal. Just as there is a mental and emotional barrier between persons of different races or fundamentally opposed religions, so that there is very little tendency for inter-marriage between the yellow and white races, or between those of the Jewish and Christian faiths, just so by a few generations of training there can be established the same emotional immunity between the normal and the hereditarily defective person.

In the series of papers dealing with hereditary abnormalities of the eyes, which is concluded in this issue, a very practical side of Eugenics is stressed, and the deductions and recommendations made there have their foundation in the application of modern genetics, as far as possible, to the conditions discussed. A glance at some of the pedigrees published in these articles will reveal how great the need for improvement is. What untold suffering, what hopes dashed to the ground for young men and women, who just at the beginning of their careers find themselves handicapped by the onset of unending darkness; what mental anguish endured by

parents, who dreaming of the future full of promise for their children, find that they themselves have bestowed upon their own flesh a heritage from which there is no release save death; what torture for the children, who aware of their probable doom, await a night that knows no dawn!

Nor is blindness the only defect which is inheritable; their name is legion, and their aspects, manifold. Some are so slight as to be negligible; others so serious as to mean the ruin of a life. Some do not interfere with the normal activities of the individual; others so incapacitate him that he becomes a charge upon the family or the public. How is all this to be remedied? Only by education of the profession, who must be made alive to the importance of the question, by and through them, the enlightenment of the public at large.

The objection will of course be made that education alone will not suffice; that after education must come legislation preventing the marrying of such defectives, and that here we are interfering with Nature and man's inalienable rights. Such persons will deplore the condition of affairs, but feel that there is no alternative; that no human being should have such power over another as to refuse him the right to marry or to procreate offspring. May it not be that sometime in the future, we will realize that no human being has the moral right to condemn another to a life of physical or mental abnormality? What would be the judgment of society upon a man, who, setting before his child two glasses, both containing apparently the same fluid, said to him, "In one of these is a harmless drink, in the other a poison which will blind you for life. I cannot help you in your choice for I myself do not know which is which. One of them, however, you must drink." Has a man any more right to force upon his unborn child, not the choice it is true, but an even chance of receiving a defect which will leave it perhaps blind, perhaps maimed for life? How long are we to permit ourselves or others to thrust upon the children of to-morrow, a probability so fraught with disaster to them and to the race? Centuries ago men demanded that none should hold in thrall another's mind; freedom of thought and speech were to be the right of all. Years

later, men died to defend the principle that no man should enslave the body of another. How long will it be before we recognize that our children, too, have a right to be free; free from a heritage which weakens their minds or cripples their bodies?

Truly the physician has a great task of education ahead and it will take a long time to accomplish it, hence there is more reason to begin it at once. But education of the public is only half the duty of the medical profession. The other half is the research interest, which they must evince in the collecting of information concerning heredity in disease. Who but the physician can make the diagnosis, verify the statements of the patient concerning the presence of similar disease in other members of the family, eliminate cases which to the lay eye are similar, but from the medical standpoint reveal a different etiology, and then, with accurate data, make the pedigree known to the world of medicine through the medium of the medical journals?

In this connection we cannot refrain from mentioning the great English ophthalmologist, Nettleship, to whom we are indebted for perhaps more pedigrees of hereditary eye conditions than to any other person. For years after he retired from active practice, he spent his time writing up cases of his own, tracing out the family history, travelling over the country to verify statements about relations, writing to colleagues in distant cities to solicit their aid when he himself could not go, so that every diagnosis and every pedigree might be as accurate as possible. In addition to this he compiled most of the cases scattered through the literature, so that his articles became a repository for knowledge that was unavailable to the reader otherwise. Such a spirit as his is needed to garner the facts which are the basis of the educational programme in Eugenics.

Nor is this all. Every generation of physicians needs to be taught over again the truths gathered in the past. Many of these are present in the textbooks, but most of those concerning the inheritance of disease can be found only in the scattered original articles, most of them inaccessible to the general practitioner, who through lack of library facilities and time, is thus cut off

from such information. Hence the value of such a series of articles as have appeared in these pages during the last year; they give the physician the information which he has not time to accumulate for himself.

The facts of inheritance are indisputable;

why not let us endeavour to use that portion of our heritage which will promote the future well-being of the race, and discard that which leaves behind those who have bitter reason to regret the day that they were born!