HEALTH PROPAGANDA.

I.—THE ADMINISTRATIVE POINT OF VIEW.*

BY

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It seems to me impossible to consider the question of "propaganda" in connexion with health matters as dissociated from education on the same subject. "Propaganda" is in any case a horrible word. Though not born of the war, it is one of the unpleasant things that were popularized as a result of that disastrous episode in modern history. During the war the word "propaganda" came to mean a competitive effort in misleading the public of the particular nation concerned. It is essentially associated with the vulgarity that is an integral part of all successful advertisement. Personally I do not believe that any good thing ever comes out of vulgarity. Having said that, I may say that I have a constitutional objection to what are called, in one of the most offensive items of American slang—also popularized during the war—"stunts."

My belief is that preventive medicine is now winning its way into its true position as the spear-head of medical progress in the future. Everybody agrees that "prevention is better than cure," and there is a great deal of lip service of sanitation and other preventive measures. But the patient and persistent efforts of the members of the public health service and their staffs have not yet achieved—and perhaps never will achieve—the prestige that attaches to the successful physician or surgeon or research worker. This, to some degree, is natural. The work of the public health officer is less individual, and much less dramatic than that of the successful physician or surgeon. This somewhat tends to depreciate the status of the public health administrator in the eyes of the general public in comparison with the status of specialists in other branches of medicine and surgery. This is especially regrettable as, almost more than his colleagues, the medical officer is required to be a "doctor" in the etymological sense of the word.

The primary function of the local sanitary authority is to provide, as far as possible, an environment in which it is possible for all classes of the community to lead a reasonably healthy life. During the present century, however, the activities of local authorities and the expenditure of public funds have been more and more devoted to the personal aspect of public health, and local authorities are now largely concerned in the actual treatment of individuals, through their pre-natal clinics, child-welfare centres, school medical services, tuberculosis services, clinics for venereal diseases, and the administration of the National Health Insurance Act.

All the vast expenditure involved has impressed those responsible with the necessity of instructing the public as to the existence of these services and the proper methods of utilizing them, and in the general principles of hygiene, so that we may maintain the "preventive" principle and lessen the necessity for purely therapeutic measures undertaken for persons who have already become diseased, largely through poverty, ignorance, and faulty environment.

Public health propaganda and education has thus become perhaps the latest duty imposed upon local authorities; for the reasons I have given it should be regarded as a basic duty, from the point of view of both improving the public health and promoting economy of public funds. Serious steps in this direction have only been taken quite recently by a minority of local authorities, and those in a somewhat tentative fashion. For instance, it was only during the last financial year that the very progressive health committee of Sheffield allocated a definite portion of its estimates to this purpose. In the meantime much work of this kind has been undertaken by many voluntary organizations, so many that the medical officer of health, who is commissioned by his authority to organize some form of propaganda and education, is utterly bewildered by the

number of organizations calling themselves "national councils," and "leagues," and "societies," all competing to advise him and supply him with lectures, demonstrations, exhibitions, and "weeks," devoted to various purposes. The inevitable result is that their competing communications find their way rather quickly to the waste-paper basket. Practically all of these organizations have secured the name of some innocent member of the nobility as president or patron, and a long list of eminent persons as members of their council or committee as the case may be. They all collect subscriptions and have a paid staff, and they tumble over each other in trying to do the same thing. Their multiplication and overlapping has become, in my opinion, almost a public scandal.

A very eminent member of this Association said at a recent meeting that they should all be "scrapped." I do not fully agree with this view. They have a right to exist, and must be given credit for admirable intentions and even a certain amount of achievement; but I am sure they ought to be co-ordinated, and, if I may humbly suggest it, I think this a function which might usefully be carried out by the Minister of Health, who might insist on registration of existing organizations with power to refuse registration to new competitors in this field, and to remove from the register existing organizations found to be obviously redundant. The register might then be reduced from about three hundred to three. The notepaper of one well-known organization of this description contains in its margin a list of affiliated societies which extends all down the page. The number of councils and committees cited, and their subtly different titles, would be comic were it not for the waste of effort and money represented. These organizations also introduce into certain branches of preventive medicine a baneful sentimentality that must tend to bring our work into disrepute. This is typified by the introduction of the word "toddlers" as a description of infants and children between the ages of 1 and 5. The term is now unfortunately officially adopted, although it is not only insulting to childhood, but misleading. It would be more applicable to persons between the age periods 90 to 95, and then it would be an insult to old age.

When the responsible administrative officer has evaded the importunity of these competing organizations he has to consider very seriously the best methods of instructing the public in the possibilities of avoiding diseases that are the direct outcome of faulty living, and leading the people into the way of health. He has a number of alternatives.

It is a common theory that such instruction should be objective, and appeal mainly to the eye, generally in the form of exhibitions. From that theory evolved the plan of adopting one method of commercial advertisement and devoting a week in the year to "focusing public opinion" on questions of health generally or some special aspect of it, such as the welfare of infants or the extermination of rats. An outcome of this was at one time "baby shows"—the ultimate indignity inflicted on infancy. I was once entrapped into association with a performance of this description. Some 900 mothers brought over 1,000 infants. They were divided into various classes on lines similar to those of the cattle show. There was approximately one prize awarded per 100 exhibitors. The result was about a dozen perspiring but triumphant mothers, and nearly 900 outraged females wounded in their tenderest susceptibilities. Nearly all the babies were made ill, and there was a material rise in the scarlet fever and measles rates of incidence. This was the *reductio ad absurdum* of "propaganda," and thoroughly mischievous. It had no element of educational value.

The other methods available are the promotion of public lectures and instruction in the schools, the distribution of special literature, and judicious use of the public press. Whichever of these methods, or whatever combination of these methods, be adopted, it is essential that attention should be directed to communal health, and that nothing should be done or said to accentuate that morbid absorption in his, or her, own health, on the part of individuals, which is one of the worst vices of our time. The "*malade imaginaire*" was sufficiently rare in the days of Molière to be made a subject of comedy. To-day he is so common as to be a public nuisance, lacking the dignity to become a tragic figure.

* A paper opening a discussion in the Section of Medical Sociology at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association, Manchester, 1929.

Briefly, to review the various forms of propaganda enumerated above, the promotion of a "week to focus public attention, etc.," has certainly the advantage of objective appeal, and may be so organized as to have real educational value. On the other hand, it may degenerate into a mere "stunt," stimulating curiosity for a few days, without any lasting effect. It should not be made an annual affair in any locality, as it is certain to become stereotyped and monotonous. It may have great value in small centres of population where public opinion needs stimulation as to the necessity of progressive action towards the advancement of public health. In large centres of population, where administration is already highly organized and progressive, it is unnecessary, and has the grave disadvantage that its organization necessarily falls upon the staff of the public health department and seriously interrupts the routine duties of its officials.

Teaching of hygiene in the schools should be a most valuable means both of propaganda and of education in hygiene. At present I fear it is not. With an overcrowded curriculum, and the necessity of cramming for examinations, the subject is not generally popular among school teachers, directors of education, or those utterly undefined people who arrogate to themselves the title of educationists. In my experience any teaching of hygiene that is given is, with few exceptions, perfunctory and in the wrong hands. In too many cases, especially in the so-called "non-provided" schools, the hygienic conditions in which the children are still compelled to spend a large portion of their childhood are so deplorable that any attempt at "precept" would be merely farcical. In my experience the schools now provided by local authorities are not only sanitary, but provide an environment of dignity which must have an elevating effect on the character, outlook, and ambition of children from the squalid homes of the poorest classes in the community. It is unfortunately nearly always in the schools maintained by the various religious sects in this country that we find conditions that are likely to hasten the departure of children to the next world—doubtless under the best auspices from the point of view of the "denominational" managers.

The promotion of public lectures can be of the utmost value, provided the lectures are given by people with the right experience and the inborn faculty of interesting and really instructing people about subjects in which they are intimately concerned. Public lectures in large halls, given by eminent persons to large audiences, even with the aid of magic lanterns, may be widely attended, but are of doubtful value. On the other hand, intimate conversations on health matters, given to quite small audiences, especially when followed by questions, which develop into a discussion between the lecturer and his audience, can be of real educational value. A number of such lectures have been given in Sheffield under the auspices of the local Insurance Committee actually in the works, and during the employees' own time. They have not only been well attended, but we have evidence that the interest aroused has spread widely among the very classes whom we wish to approach. A great deal of similar and equally successful work is being done under the auspices of the Workers' Education Association and the Miners' Welfare Association.

The distribution of special literature is a process of careful selection, of elimination of propaganda by uninformative or unbalanced faddists, and the encouragement of well-written and sound educational matter. Like every medical officer of health, I have submitted to me an inordinate number of pamphlets, etc., with offers of unlimited supplies for free distribution. I look upon them all with suspicion, and most of them find their way to the wastepaper basket. In common with most of my colleagues, I find the little magazine called *Better Health*, published by the Central Council for Health Education, of real value, and so well edited as to be free from any objectionable features. It is the only publication at present distributed officially by my department, apart from purely local leaflets, etc.

There remains for consideration only the proper use of the press. All medical men know that we have to use great discretion in this matter, and that we are very properly restrained by rules laid down by the General

Medical Council. The general health, thanks largely to past propaganda work, has become of such public interest that anything bearing on it is now good "copy" for the press, and consequently welcome. There is accordingly an inducement to medical men to contribute articles dealing with these matters. If such articles are signed, the writer, if in practice, inevitably comes under the suspicion of advertising, which is, and I hope will always continue to be, anathema to the profession in this country. It is, however, open to any medical man to contribute to the press any information which he believes to be of public importance, and reliable, as from "a medical correspondent," and for such contributions he is perfectly entitled to receive any fees usually paid by the journal which publishes his contribution. Personally I believe it to be most important that the public should be kept in touch with the progress of medical science by wise and well-informed contributions to the public press.

In conclusion, I wish to declare my belief that the most important work done in the propagation of knowledge about health matters is that which is being done daily and persistently, without ostentation or advertisement, by our public health departments, their sanitary services, their maternity and child welfare services, their school medical services, tuberculosis services, and other sections of their activities of which the public know little, but from which they derive more benefit than they ever will from any much-advertised "propaganda."

II.—THE PRACTITIONER.*

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In any discussion which may prove to be controversial it is a great advantage to find some basis of agreement from which to start. In this case we may well find one in the statement that *health is the most important element in human happiness*. Since the object of propaganda can only be to increase the standard of health, we must, then, agree that the question of its value deserves our sympathetic study and demands our frank and careful scrutiny.

This movement, with the backing of a young and energetic Ministry, has been taken up with enthusiasm by many public-spirited persons. Sections of the press have pushed it in the interests of their readers, or eagerly exploited it in the pursuit of their net sales campaign. The result is that it has attained the rank of a fashion, so that the G.P. (the initials stand for both general practitioner and general public) find it easier to render their unstudied sympathy than to apply the scrutiny either frank or careful.

No one who speaks on this question fails to quote Mr. Lloyd George's phrase: "You cannot run an A1 empire on a C3 population." Having quoted it they consider that there is no necessity to go further, and no one ever inquires into the evidence on which our population was alleged to be C3. If in the interests of careful scrutiny you do inquire, you will find no evidence to disprove, and some to support, the view that it was based on the figures obtained as the result of medical examination of those civilians left when the Conscription Act was passed—that is to say, at a time when Mr. Asquith told us that five million men had already volunteered and had been passed A1. Until someone can disprove this view, and unless figures are produced capable of some sort of comparison with other countries like France and Germany, the phrase has no whit more value for our present discussion than has the exactly parallel statement of fact that "You cannot make butter out of buttermilk."

But apart from all this, there is other evidence that we can judge for ourselves. Both the birth rate and the death rate are falling, therefore the average age of the population must be increasing. It needs no proving that the years per head spent in unproductive old age are also increasing, and it follows that it is more than ever important that the effective years of every life should be as

* Read in a discussion in the Section of Medical Sociology at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association, Manchester, 1928.