ETHICS OF ABORTION, STERILIZATION, AND BIRTH CONTROL

ADDRESS BY LORD RIDDELL

At the opening of the second winter session of the Hampstead General and North-West London Hospital Post-Graduate School, on January 6th, an address was delivered by Lord RIDDELL, who took as his subject "The ethics of abortion, sterilization, and birth control."

Lord Riddell said that the much-discussed subject of abortion raised questions of supreme difficulty. The practice was one which few of the ancients before the Christian era seriously condemned. Certain Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, expressed themselves directly in its favour. Abortion was not expressly prohibited by the Mosaic law, and the New Testament was silent on the subject. The Christian Fathers declared that "one identical life principle exists from conception to death," and that consequently abortion at any stage was murder. That was still the Roman Catholic view. The Jews, on the contrary, regarded abortion as justifiable when performed to protect the mother.

THE LAW AND ABORTION

In England abortion had been a crime for some 600 years, but the first statutes prohibiting it were not passed until the early nineteenth century. The existing law was comprised in the Offences Against the Person Act, 1861, which provided that any person who unlawfully used any instrument or drug with the intent to procure a miscarriage should be guilty of a felony. It was agreed by lawyers and doctors that a miscarriage might be lawfully procured when the object was to save the mother's life or to avoid serious injury to her health; the essence of offence was guilty intent. Lord Riddell went on to refer to the startling criticisms of the administration of the law recently made by Mr. Justice McCardie. There was no doubt that the learned judge had performed a public service in directing attention to the subject, but he had created a most difficult situation, for if a prisoner came before Mr. Justice McCardie or some other judge who shared his views he might expect lenient treatment if it could be shown that the abortifacient was trying to help a woman in distress; on the other hand, if the case was tried before a judge with more conventional views, a drastic sentence might be expected. Abortifacients, of course, usually plied their trade for money, not to relieve distress. To the average mind there was a vast difference of opinion between abortion at an early stage in the development of the foetus and at a later stage, and the early statutes of 1802 and 1828 drew a distinction between a woman quick with child (quickening being supposed to occur about the eighteenth week) and one not quick. It seemed highly desirable that the law should be altered, or that there should be an agreement between the judges as to the principle on which these cases were dealt with. Parliament was not likely to change the law without strong pressure from public opinion.

This was largely a woman's question, and in Germany, where abortion was more prevalent than in any other country, the subject had been actively taken up by women. There was ample evidence that failure to reduce maternal mortality was largely due to the influence of abortion and attempted abortion. An early solution could not be hoped for, as the subject was tangled up with tradition, religion, sentiment, false modesty, and the like. It could only be hoped that temperate discussion would enable a way to be found out of the difficulty.

CONTRACEPTION

Turning to birth control, Lord Riddell traced this movement back to the doctrines of Francis Place in 1822. Certain sections of the community—Roman Catholics and numerous members of other religious

bodies—were bitterly opposed to contraception, and there was a certain amount of criticism based on hygienic reasons. The official view of the Church of England was set forth in the resolution of the Lambeth Conference of 1930, which laid stress on abstinence, while admitting that there did exist moral situations which might make it obligatory to use other methods. "Each couple must decide for themselves, as in the sight of God, after the most careful and conscientious thought, and if perplexed in mind, after taking competent advice, both medical and spiritual." The exponents of birth control held that there was no divine or human law prohibiting this practice, that practised in moderation it exercised a hygienic, moralistic influence, inasmuch as it facilitated marriage, prevented the ruin of women's health by too frequent pregnancies, enabled parents to moderate their families in proportion to their means, and thus to maintain and educate their children in comfort. In short, the birth control party claimed with much vehemence that the subject should be dealt with on purely utilitarian principles. After pointing out the dilemma in which these controversies placed the ordinary man or woman, and noting one helpful passage in the recent Encyclical of the Pope, in which it was admitted that in matrimony, as well as in the use of matrimonial rights, there were secondary ends, Lord Riddell said that perhaps the answer would be best provided by the verdict of the majority, and the birth rate figures in all European countries and in America showed the views of the majority in unmistakable fashion.

STERILIZATION OF THE UNFIT

Turning to the subject of sterilization, Lord Riddell said that it was generally agreed that lunacy and mental deficiency were serious menaces to the national well-being; also, that these were largely hereditary diseases. The segregation of mental deficients was incomplete, as the patients were usually allowed out on parole for short periods. Social reformers alleged that voluntary sterilization, surrounded by numerous precautions, would go far to prevent the propagation of more mental defectives, also that much-needed economies might be effected, and the lives of many of these unfortunate people be made happier, as they would be able to reside with their relatives. The objection to the proposal was threefold. The religious objection, as in the case of abortion, did not lend itself to argument. Another objection was on the ground that it would infringe individual freedom, but to this it was replied that the operation would only be performed with the consent of the patient or of his or her relatives, and that the sanction of an independent judicial body would also be required. There was a third, a sentimental, objection, which might be expressed in the words of the Bishop of Exeter when dealing with birth control: "If life has been sweet to us, why should we deprive others of the privilege we value and enjoy?" The exponents of birth control, however, characterized the sentimental objection as absurd.

It was easy, said Lord Riddell in conclusion, to appreciate the arguments against abortion and birth control among the normal; but from a logical, ethical, and economic point of view it seemed to him that the arguments of those who demanded sterilization of the mental defective were unanswerable.

The ninth conference of the International Federation of Eugenic Organizations was held at Farnham, Dorset, in September, 1930, and a report of the proceedings has now been published in pamphlet form. Copies may be obtained from the honorary administrative secretary, Mrs. C. B. S. Hodson, 406, Fulham Road, S.W.6. The contents include a note on blood group researches in Holland, by Dr. Van Herwerden; a report, by Mrs. Bosanquet, on American research on mental measurement; papers on hemilateral asymmetry by Mr. C. J. Bond, on inherited variability in corneal size and refractive index by Dr. P. J. Waardenburg, and on heredity of eye colour by Dr. G. P. Frets; and Sir Arthur Keith's address on the urgency of eugenic reform.