

THE REPORT ON STERILIZATION¹

I. EXTRACTS.²

1. The rare type of moral defectives (7).

2. The difficulty which arises from the use of a vague descriptive terminology is increased by the fact that equally vague terms with a slightly different content are used in other countries.

These variations in terminology make statistical comparisons misleading, besides making it difficult to interpret foreign researches in comparison with our own (8).

3. Whether or not the incidence of defect, *i.e.*, the proportion of the total births who are or become defective is increasing, it is beyond doubt that the proportion of defectives alive to-day is larger than it was a generation ago.

At the same time, grave as the problem is, there is no ground in our view for the alarmist views expressed in some quarters that there is wholesale racial degeneration (10).

4. The mode of transmission of these conditions is a more contentious subject; and it must be admitted that it is only in recent years sociologists have undertaken seriously to study the problem (13).

5. The earliest and still the most widely known attempt to demonstrate the inheritance of mental defect was the investigation of the famous Kallikak family, conducted in the United States by Dr. H. H. Goddard. Judged by modern standards, the technique employed was unscientific and the instructions to the field-workers so tendentious that it is not surprising that they succeeded in finding what they were told to seek.

The criticism made by Dr. Myerson and others of this and similar enquiries has never been answered, and we do not think it necessary to spend time on any analysis of the dismal chronicles of the Kallikaks, the Jukes and the Nams (19).

6. The evidence indicates that the proportion of defectives now in institutions, one or both of whose parents can be shown to have been defectives is small (21).

¹ *Report of the Departmental Committee on Sterilization.* (H.M. Stationery Office; 2/-.)

² Numbers in brackets refer to paragraph numbers of the *Report*.

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7. We find a remarkable consensus of opinion among those who have had long experience of institutional work and of defectives in general that the proportion of defectives with certainly defective parents is small (21).

8. These (3,733) defectives produced 8,841 children, of whom 2,001, or 22.5 per cent., have already died. The percentage of deaths is striking; and this confirms the conclusion drawn from other evidence to us that the mortality amongst defectives and their offspring is abnormally high (26).

9. There is a widespread belief that one of the characteristics of defectives is abnormal fertility. This is not borne out either by the enquiry or by such other statistics we have been able to collect bearing upon the size of the families of known defectives . . . Except for a relatively small number of isolated instances, we find there is no evidence of excessive fertility, and indeed it would be easy to set off against these exceptional cases a much larger number of cases in which the fertility was low.

The supposed abnormal fertility of defectives is, in our view, largely mythical, and results from the accident that from time to time distressing exceptions to the general rule find their way into the Courts and are noticed in the Press (29).

10. It is impossible in the present state of our knowledge about the causation of mental defect to forecast with certainty whether a child of any given union will exhibit mental abnormalities.

It can, however, be shown that whether the cause be bad heredity or adverse environmental conditions or both, the children of parents one or both of whom are mentally defective are on the average below the normal; and our enquiry shows that nearly one third of such children as survive are likely to be defective, and more than two-fifths must be expected to exhibit some degree of mental abnormality (33).

³ This finding confirms the previous finding of the *Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded*. In their Report, published July 10th, 1908, they say: 'Apart from this loose and equivocal use of the terms *mental defect* and *heredity* another great difficulty has been the absence of statistics . . . Owing to the absence of necessary statistics an absolutely conclusive reply based on facts alone cannot be given to the question whether a parent or parents who are mentally defective are much more likely to have mentally defective children than are mentally normal persons' (*Report*, par. 543).

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11. The available data are still insufficient to enable a final answer to be given to many questions relating to causation (37).

12. Whereas the marriage-rate of defectives is lower than that of the normal population the illegitimate birth-rate is considerably higher . . . The enquiry made by the Committee shows that out of 3,247 defective women known to local authorities to have had children . . . 66 per cent. were unmarried (57).

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These verbatim extracts are taken from the *Report of the Departmental Committee on Sterilization* presented by the Minister of Health to Parliament by command of His Majesty in December, 1933, The eighteen months since its appointment (June 9th, 1932) have seen thirty-six meetings at which evidence was taken from sixty expert witnesses. It would be difficult not to be impressed by the list of Boards, Societies, Institutions, experts from which the Committee sought the facts necessary for a verdict. That verdict, which justifies the traditional Catholic attitude expressed in *Casti Connubii*, is *there is no need of Compulsory Sterilization*.

For the moment no one could set an accurate value on the Report, which will go out to the nations of the world with not a few weighty recommendations. Amongst these recommendations we must assuredly rank the (justified or unjustified) opinion about this country's post-war wisdom. Nations that are vocal in denouncing us for this or that failure to keep faith are quite as certainly though less vocally in admiration of our social and financial steadiness. Many of those who refuse to see the future as an alternative between the Communism of Russia and the Fascism of Italy or Germany, are wondering whether our own steadiness under social and financial fire may not provide a third alternative that will keep most of what they prize in family and national life. At the least it will be safe to say that if any party in a nation proposes the Nazi policy of compulsory mutilation, they will be met by England's considered and emphatic rejection of compulsion.

Another recommendation of the Report will be its judicial fullness and fairness; to all those who had a right to

be heard it has given a full and fair hearing. It **has** been **in the best** manner of English judicial procedure.

It has not bounded its investigations by the coast-line; but has gone abroad, especially to those countries where compulsory mutilation of innocent citizens is carried out, or **is** arranged to be carried out, in the alleged interests of citizenship. Especially significant and reassuring are the words **of** thanks: 'To the Eugenics Society we are indebted for a summary **of** the chief researches which have been made in foreign countries.' This world-width of outlook gives the Report a judicial finality which will make it of world-wide influence for some years to come.

A few words of comment on the extracts cannot, of course, add to their evidential weight, but may serve to direct the average reader to the value of the evidence.

II. COMMENTS.

1. This almost unique reference to Moral Defectives very guardedly calls them rare. Yet it is clear that moral deficiency linked, not with mental deficiency, but with mental efficiency, is the world's greatest danger. In other words, the greatest social evil is sin. But ethically and psychologically speaking, the less the mental efficiency the less the sin.

2. Few Reports, except the Royal Commission's Report of 1908, make such mention of ignorance, and plead more earnestly for further facts and a deeper investigation of the causation of these facts. This application of the principle that 'the beginning of wisdom is to know our own ignorance' is a silent but effective refutation of those extremists for whom mutilation, which might be the ultimate and extreme remedy, became the first.

4. In reminding the alarmists that the study of causes—*i.e.*, the scientific study—of mental deficiency is only **of** recent growth, the Report reads another lecture to those headlong social zealots whose mutilation proposals were **a** thoughtless mutilation of the foundation of the British tradition of personal liberty.

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5. We have seldom read in any Report such a condemnation of a group of professional experts. Books written by 'great authorities' on mental deficiency seldom failed to give the 'dismal chronicles'—and even the animal-like authentic portraits—of the Kallikaks, the Jukes, and the Nams. It is to the credit of the Committee that it will 'not spend time' in judging the mental level of the United States by analysing the alleged spread of mental deficiency based on the records of three of her families.

6. It would seem that the group of alarmists is not mainly recruited from the practical experts.

7. These practical people, these experts of experts, are reassuring. From their facts we should have to conclude that if the social danger had to be met by some means, and could be met only by mutilation, then not only mental deficient but mental efficient would have to be mutilated.

8. An *a priori* view of the intelligence and moral goodness of nature, *i.e.* of God, would have led us to these conclusions. But when *a priori* anticipations are verified by the facts no higher verification is desirable, or indeed possible.

10. Again and again have the defenders of the citizens' liberty and integrity urged the finding of the Royal Commission that 'there was no evidence that mentally defective parents were much more likely to have defective children than are mentally normally parents.' When an answer to this momentous finding was vouchsafed it usually took the form of saying that since the date of the Royal Commission fresh evidence had been discovered.

But the present Report, in slightly more guarded form, makes the same decision, so fatal to all compulsory sterilization proposals.

Its two safeguarding clauses are 'in our present state of knowledge about the causation of mental defect'; and that 'on the average' mentally defective parents will tend to have a certain percentage of mentally defective children.

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But this law of averages, as the Report accurately states, does not allow anyone to say with certainty that the child of defective parents will be mentally abnormal.

11. This call for further investigation, and more data, must arrest the mutilation policy of the alarmists.

12. 'The marriage-rate is lower than that of the normal population.' Again, we have here an empiric verification of an antecedent probability. Of the defective women who had children, sixty-six per cent. were unmarried. But parenthood is a dual responsibility. And the evidence is that the other parent in this sixty-six per cent. was mentally normal.

We here venture to suggest that whereas the mutilation of the innocent has no justification in ethics or sociology, the mutilation of criminals who abuse mental deficients would only be social justice. But unless we are extremely alert, our modern social panic-legislation may end by punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty. It is a matter of gratitude that in this country at least between us and this panic-mutilation stand the wisdom and justice of an authoritative Report.

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Before we bring our commentary to a close we would ask all sincere-minded social thinkers to consider the alleged growth in mental deficiency. This growth, if it exists, is admittedly modern. It is a new fact. It is not a law; because such a law operating over the thousands of years man has existed would have given us more than the present incidence of mental defect. Here in England, where investigations have been most thorough, there are at most some 300,000 mental defectives out of a population of 40,000,000. In other words, the incidence of mental deficiency is only 1 in 133. But if the alleged rate of growth at present observable was a constant, the majority of the population would be mentally defective.

In other words, the growth in mental deficiency is **not** an old law, but a **new** fact.

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Now in all physical investigations *new facts must be traced to new factors.*

What, then, is this *new factor* which is responsible for **the** (alleged) new fact? Perhaps some other Commission **will** investigate and report.

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The Jewish race presents the most valuable field for such an investigation of the problem of mental deficiency. Their history is known, as no other nation's history is known, for some four thousand years. During that time they have continually in-wed. Almost every factor (except modern industrialism) has had an opportunity of lowering their mental level. Yet to-day the Jewish problem is not that of their mental deficiency, but of their high mental efficiency, amounting almost to mental supremacy. In saying this we are calling the attention of students of genetics to a unique field of investigation which provides them with two invaluable qualities—a compact familial group and a long period of time for the full development of hereditary or environmental activities.

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As the present paper deals explicitly with the findings of the Report, it must not be taken to agree with the recommendations of the Report, some of which are frankly opposed to sound ethics.

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