

is unnecessary for the purpose for which the book is apparently designed, namely a presentation of a broad view of the problems in the field of nutrition and their application to a practical program of medical care.

REGINE K. STIX, M. D.

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## EUGENICAL STERILIZATION

THE American Neurological Association has rendered a valuable service in presenting a critical and unbiased study of the problem of inheritance of mental disease, and in pointing out the importance of basing a sterilization program on known facts instead of propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

In reviewing the existing laws on sterilization the authors point out that while such laws exist in many parts of the United States, with the exception of California, no state is enforcing its sterilization laws and "the number sterilized is of no great biologic or social significance."<sup>2</sup>

There have been two arguments upon which most propaganda for sterilization has been based: first, that mental disease is on the increase in the United States and, second, that the mentally diseased and feeble-minded reproduce at a much faster rate than does the rest of the population. Careful analysis of available figures shows that the alleged increase in mental disease in some states is due to an increase in mental diseases of old age—a concomitant to an aging population—decreased facilities for caring for such patients under urban living conditions, and increased availability of adequate hospital service for commitment. The age-specific rates of each mental disease in the population have changed little in the last twenty years. There has been little study of birth and marriage rates among the mentally diseased, but even Popenoe, an ardent apostle of sterilization states that "In general, no large group of institutional insane (in California) will produce enough children wholly to reproduce itself, even if it were not sterilized."<sup>3</sup> There is apparently a low marriage rate among the insane and a low reproduction rate among those married.

In evaluating studies of the inheritability of specific diseases, the au-

<sup>1</sup> Committee of the American Neurological Association for the Investigation of Eugenic Sterilization: *EUGENICAL STERILIZATION: A Reorientation of the Problem*. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

thors conclude that since psychiatrists agree that psychoses are groups of conditions of unknown etiology rather than single disease entities, it is difficult to study them as separate inheritable entities. They stress the interrelation of heredity and environment in mental disease, feeble-mindedness, and in epilepsy, showing the part that intercurrent disease as well as other environmental factors may play in their etiology. The Committee concludes that on the basis of present knowledge there may be an hereditary factor in dementia praecox, manic depressive psychoses, and epilepsy, but that the number of cases of these diseases appearing in any one family is much less frequent than it would be if their inheritance were subject to Mendelian laws. Feeble-mindedness appears to be somewhat more hereditary than mental disease and epilepsy, but here, too, environment may play an important rôle.

In a brief chapter on crime the authors conclude that "while there may be a constitution which . . . appears as criminal conduct, the effort to breed it out by any eugenical measures is, in the present state of our knowledge not to be recommended, and that more fruitful approaches to crime are to be found in social measures."<sup>4</sup>

On the positive side of the question it is noted that the feeble-minded frequently breed useful, docile people who fulfill a definite function in the present structure of society. The Committee notes that men of genius have frequently come of mentally diseased stock and many have, in their later lives, become the victims of mental disease. Compulsory sterilization on a wide basis might prevent the birth of many valuable individuals in both these classifications.

The recommendations of the Committee on the basis of these studies emphasize the importance of environment as well as heredity and state that present knowledge does not warrant the sterilization of normal persons as possible carriers of familial diseases, with rare exceptions. The Committee feels that any sterilization laws in the United States should be on a voluntary basis and should be applicable not only to patients in state institutions but to all patients in the community. It urges adequate machinery for administration of the law and adequate legal protection for those administering it. It recommends the consideration of selective sterilization in the order listed, in the case of:

1. Recognized hereditary diseases such as Huntington's chorea, Friedrich's ataxia, etc.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 152.

2. Feeble-mindedness of familial type
3. Dementia praecox
4. Manic depressive psychosis
5. Epilepsy

The final and most important recommendation is for coordinated and planned long time research which would study the incidence of mental disease in control populations as well as in the families of institutionalized patients. The Committee concludes that "society does not need to hurry into a program based on fear and propaganda. Although the problem of mental disease and defectiveness is enormous, there exists no new social or biological emergency."<sup>5</sup>

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