

physician is also a ruler having the human body as subject, and is not a mere money-maker."

KATHERINE SIMON

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## THE FAMILY AS A UNIT IN PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

ACCORDING to the article "The Family as a Unit in Public Health Research" by Margaret Merrell, classification and analysis on a family unit basis is necessary to gain a clear picture of the public health problems relating to families. The concept of the family unit depends on the nature of the study. To the sociologist, a family would include the members sharing board and a common dwelling unit either with or without regard to relationship, while to the geneticist, it may consist of certain blood relations, living and dead, regardless of place of abode.

The interpretation of family studies is influenced by whether the place of emphasis is upon the individual or the family. Individual members may be used as a basis of classification provided the family as a unit is kept intact.

Two illustrations are presented by Dr. Merrell in which the family is the real unit of study. In an analysis of the secondary attack rate in infectious disease, all members of the families of primary cases are pooled to determine age specific attack rates which are then compared with a group of control families. The study of measles and scarlet fever in Providence, R. I. in 1939 by E. B. Wilson and his associates utilized this method of analysis. Classification of married couples as to certain characteristics such as age and economic status when they became parents has also been used in studies of differential fertility. A cross tabulation of the combined information on both parents presents a more complete picture than charting the characteristics of the parents separately. Thus although the young wives have higher birth rates than older wives, these rates vary with the age of the husband. In the Indianapolis study

<sup>1</sup> Merrell, Margaret: The Family as a Unit in Public Health Research. *Human Biology*, February, 1952, 24, No. 1, 11 pps.

on the Social and Psychological Factors Affecting Fertility, C. V. Kiser and P. K. Whelpton showed how fertility planning by the parents and socio-economic status of the family affected fertility rates.

Attempts have been made to study public health problems on a family unit basis. Lowell J. Reed developed a family life table in a study of the effect of a chronic disease on the family. The Maryland Blue Cross has selected hospitalization-prone families in order to determine their characteristics. In the Eastern Health District of Baltimore several attempts have been made to determine various family characteristics of stable and non-stable families.

The author stresses the importance in family studies of placing the emphasis on the family rather than on the individual family members. This appreciation of the family as a unit has been neglected in the past.

MARGUERITE KELLER

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### ENRICHING THE YEARS<sup>1</sup>

IN 1947 a committee was set up by the New York State Legislature under the chairmanship of Senator Thomas C. Desmond, to study the conditions and problems of the aged and "... to turn the years of discard into a rich, fitting climax to years of living." For five years, the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Problems of the Aging, has worked to obtain a better understanding of the senior citizens of our society. The findings and recommendations of this Committee are presented in the monograph *ENRICHING THE YEARS*. The monograph also contains articles on nutrition, health, chronic disease, rehabilitation, housing, education, employment, pension plans, and industry as they relate to the older person.

In New York State in 1950, 8.5 per cent of the population was 65 years of age and over. It is estimated that the State has now approximately 1,400,000 persons in that age category plus

<sup>1</sup> *ENRICHING THE YEARS*. New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Problems of the Aging. Legislative Document, No. 32, 1953, 199 pp.