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Contributors

Tebb, William, 1830-1917.

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THE SPREAD OF LEPROSY.

A WEST INDIAN COMPLAINT.

BY WILLIAM TEBB.

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SINCE the date of my last communication, additional facts upon this subject have been brought to my notice which may be not without interest to your readers. The people of the West Indies complain, and not without reason, that, since the abolition of slavery, questions of vital importance receive so little attention from the Colonial Government, and practically none at all from Parliament and the public Press in England. The British West Indies, with one and a quarter million inhabitants, comprise some of the most beautiful and densely populated islands in the world, inhabited by people rapidly outgrowing the unfortunate conditions inherited through centuries of barbarism and debasing slavery, and steadily advancing in education and civilisation. With the exception of Barbados, which has about 4,200 voters in a population of 180,000, and Jamaica, with a small elective element, they are without representative institutions, and are governed from London as Crown colonies, by officials appointed at the Colonial Office, under a traditional system which the people believe to be inimical to all reforms. In nearly all these islands, as well as in British Guiana and India, the Crown Governments are actively, though doubtless unconsciously, engaged in disseminating one of the most repulsive and incurable of human maladies; and this is carried on in defiance of public opinion, and in the teeth of overwhelming evidence of its disastrous results. As far back as 1871, Dr. R. Hall Bakewell, Vaccinator General of Trinidad, testified before a Select Committee of the House of Commons that there was a very strong opinion among medical men in the West Indies that leprosy was communicated by vaccination, and he (Dr. Bakewell) had seen several cases where vaccination seemed to be the only explanation. In the "Leprosy" report of an inquiry made, some years ago, by the Royal College of Physicians, evidence of a similar character was disclosed. "The increase of leprosy," said Dr. Bakewell, "being coincident with vaccination, has made people extremely alarmed about vaccinating from those having a leprous taint." Dr. B. J. Bechtinger,* who has devoted

* Dr. Bechtinger's statement has since been confirmed by official reports in Hawaii, issued by successive Presidents of the Honolulu Board of Health. And a Bill has recently been introduced in the Legislature to repeal the Vaccination Laws by reason of the proofs of this special danger.

twenty-seven years to the study of this branch of dermatology in the East and West Indies, in South America, and in the Sandwich Islands, writes, Jan., 1889, that he considers the serious increase of the disease to be "largely due" to its spread at the point of the lancet in vaccination. He has often been consulted by parents whose families were entirely without taint of skin disease, where one of the children has been inoculated in this way. The present medical superintendent of the Leper Hospital, Mahaica, British Guiana, Dr. C. F. Castor, in his report of 1887, addressed to the Surgeon-General, says, "a most probable means of communicating leprosy is by vaccination," and adds, "it ought to be known far and wide, in countries where leprosy is endemic, as with us, *there is every certainty of inoculation through vaccination.*" Dr. Robert Francis Blake, a well-known practitioner at Port of Spain, Trinidad, informed me of three distinct cases of *vaccinolepra* which had casually come under his own observation, and he believes that such cases are far from uncommon. Being convinced of the mischiefs wrought by this system of contaminating the public health, he sent particulars of these cases in July, 1887, to the Governor, Sir William Robinson, and communicated the facts to a well-known pathologist, Professor W. T. Gairdner, of Glasgow, with a view of bringing medical and public opinion to bear on the subject and having the evil arrested. Dr. Black considers that the law which compels such frightful risks in Trinidad, where leprosy is so decidedly on the increase, is a cruel and irreparable blunder, and that the first step towards stopping the mischief is its repeal.

This leprous arm-to-arm vaccination is extensively practised in the West Indies, the wealthy alone being able to indulge in the luxury of calflymph, for which in private practice a minimum charge of from five to ten dollars is made for each operation. The vaccination law in Trinidad, unlike that of British Guiana, referred to in a previous communication, is rigorously enforced, only seven per cent. of the surviving children, according to the Surgeon-General's report for 1888, escaping vaccination; and in no part of the West Indies is leprosy reported to be so widely diffused as in this beautiful island.

I accepted the invitation of Dr. Bevan Rake, the medical superintendent, to visit the Leper Asylum, Mucurapo, near Port of Spain. The institution contains 180 patients, admirably cared for by the Dominican Sisters, who are unceasing in their self-sacrificing efforts to mitigate the appalling misery of these most unfortunate sufferers; but I will not stop to harrow the feelings of your readers by any attempt to describe the ghastly human objects I saw around me. In his report of 1887, addressed to the Surgeon-General, Dr. Rake says, "The new infirmary at the Asylum was opened in August last, and was quickly filled, nineteen patients being admitted on the 19th and nine more on the 25th. Since then it has been constantly full." A new ward is to be built at once to contain thirty additional beds, and at the present rate of increase much more accommodation will be needed. There are now fourteen lepers in the Colonial Hospital (Port of Spain) awaiting vacancies for admission to the Asylum. In a later report (for 1888) Dr. Rake says, "The possibility of introducing leprosy by vaccination, which has also been a good deal discussed during the year, is subsidiary to the question of contagion, *i.e.*, the communication of leprosy by any means from one person to another."

Dr. Rake, however, permit me to point out, does not furnish facts in support of the doctrine of contagion, which, if true, could, one would suppose, be readily obtained at the institution over which he so ably presides. The Lady Superintendent informed me that she had been at the asylum seventeen years, and the Sister who has charge of the dispensary had been there twenty years; one of the wardsmen has been employed for thirty-three years, and some of the laundresses and nurses twelve years or more; and no case of contagion, apart from inoculation, had ever been reported as far as she knew.

On the 22nd January, 1889, I visited the Lazaretto at Barbados, another crowded institution. A new ward is now in course of construction, to accommodate thirty-two more patients; but the applications from the single parish of St. Michael are greater than the extra beds to be provided. I may mention that the island of Barbados comprises thirteen parishes, with a total population of about 180,000, of which St. Michael's contains about a sixth; and it is estimated that 150 to 200 more beds ought to be provided under the present system of voluntary segregation. If the segregation, which only includes the leprous poor and pauper class, were compulsory, as some now demand, the alarming spread of the disease, which is endemic in all the islands, would be still more fully exhibited. The theory of contagion has, during the past twenty years, been repudiated by two independent Leprosy Committees of the Royal College of Physicians. At the Barbados Lazaretto I found that some of the nurses had been employed for many years (one for over twenty), and the superintendent, Mr. A. B. Winter, stated that he had never known a case of infection by contagion; nor had any of the laundry women of the establishment ever been infected. Captain Fortescue, whose duty it had been to inspect the Leper Asylum at Kaow, Essequibo, for a period of six years, told me that he had never heard of a medical man, nurse, or attendant, being infected by leprous contagion.

The fact of the increase of this terrible disease is beyond dispute; it is admitted everywhere, and denied by no competent observer. I have again and again been requested to call attention to it in the English Press, and if possible have the subject introduced in Parliament, as the most likely means of arresting so terrible a scourge, which has grown already to formidable dimensions. In conclusion I may summarise the facts as follows:—

- 1.—That evidence from all recognised authorities, and in all quarters, shows that leprosy is seriously increasing throughout the West Indies.
- 2.—That the theory of contagion put forward to account for this increase is untenable, for want of evidence; is denied by the highest medical authorities, both at home and abroad; and, if true, would only account for an infinitesimal portion of such increase.
- 3.—That all leading authorities admit that leprosy is communicable by inoculation.
- 4.—That the only method of inoculation extensively and systematically practised is by means of arm-to-arm vaccination; and that leprosy has been distinctly traced to this source by many local medical practitioners, including several medical superintendents of the Leper Asylums, and some of the ablest dermatologists in Europe.

EVIDENCE FROM THE REPORT OF THE SELECT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE.

THOSE who are disposed to make light of the possibilities of extending the plague of leprosy by means of vaccination should consider the evidence adduced by Dr. R. Hall Bakewell, formerly Vaccinator-General of Trinidad, before the Vaccination Committee of the House of Commons in 1871.

Dr. Hall Bakewell observed (Answer 3563, p. 207):—

“There is a very strong opinion prevalent in Trinidad, and in the West Indies generally, that leprosy has been introduced into the system by vaccination; and I may say that, as Vaccinator-General of Trinidad, I found that all the medical men, when they had occasion to vaccinate either their own children or those of patients in whom they were specially interested, applied to me for English lymph; and that was so marked, that in one instance a man, who had never spoken to me before, wrote me quite a friendly letter, in order to get lymph from England, when he had to vaccinate his own child. It is quite evident that the only reason for wanting lymph from England must be that they consider it free from contaminating the system by leprosy; because, of course, there is an equal chance, and probably a greater chance in England, of the lymph being contaminated by syphilis.”

Question 3564, and Dr. Bakewell's answer (pp. 207-8), are as follows:—

Q. “Have you had experience of any case in which leprosy has been introduced by vaccination?”

A. “I have seen several cases in which it seemed to be the only explanation. I have a case, now under treatment, of the son of a gentleman from India who has contracted leprosy, both the parents being of English origin. I saw the case of a child last year, who, though a creole of the Island of Trinidad, is born of English parents, and is a leper, and there is no other cause to which it is attributable. Sir Ranald Martin, who is a great authority on these points, agreed with me that the leprosy arose from vaccination.”

There is of course nothing to surprise us in the fact that the prevailing diseases of a district are propagated by vaccination; and if leprosy should ever get a foothold in this country, there can be no doubt that it may be indefinitely extended by vaccination. A short time ago we heard of a case of leprosy in Dublin, and of another in the London Meat Market, and, with the communications that we have with tropical countries, there is no reason why such cases should not be multiplied.

There is one sentence in Dr. Bakewell's evidence which must be specially borne in mind; it is that which has reference to the vaccination by a medical man of his own children or of those of patients in whom he is specially interested. It would seem to follow from this that there are children in whom no medical man is specially interested, and who may be inoculated with leprosy, syphilis, lupus, or any other horrible pollution, without greatly troubling the minds and consciences of persons in authority.

H. N. MOZLEY, M.A.



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