

### The Work of the Medical Research Committee.

WHEN a certain small fraction of the National Health Insurance funds was set apart for purposes of research, the experiment was regarded even by many scientific men with suspicion or indifference. It was suggested that the State aid, thus provided for research, would result only in creating a new class of Civil Servants, and might, indeed, lead to the sterilisation of such of the younger men as had earned appointment under the scheme by the excellence of their early researches. It was also objected that any concentration of State aid in a central institute or among a single group of workers would be effected only at the price of starvation of the work already being carried out with insufficient means in the various universities and research institutes of the country. The work of the Medical Research Committee during the first five years of its existence has brilliantly refuted such *a priori* objections, and has, indeed, justified the view that the action taken in 1914 represents the greatest advance in the organisation of scientific effort in the service of medical science that has yet taken place in this country. The Committee seized the opportunity afforded by the war, and initiated and supported numerous investigations urgently required for the effective treatment of our soldiers in the field. So well did it succeed that, by the end of the war, it had secured for practically all the men fitted for original inquiry not only the opportunity, but also adequate payment, either by way of commissions in the Navy, or Army, or Air Force, or by research grants.

As the report points out, the casualties and mortality of peace are not smaller and less painful, but only less conspicuous and more familiar, than those of war. For example, the epidemic of influenza killed during a few months more young people in their prime than fell in battle during the whole war. Fully justified, then, are the efforts made by the Medical Research Committee to create and maintain organised scientific work, which shall repeat and continue for the maladies of peace the same success as was effected for those of war. Taking the difficulties of the situation into account, the report is really a wonderful record of achievement.

The Committee carries out its work in two directions. In the first place, it maintains a small nucleus of workers in whole-time service. Most of these will pursue their researches in the central institute, located in the old Mount Vernon Hospital, which has been adapted for this purpose; though, where the object of the work requires it, these workers may be attached to hospitals or laboratories elsewhere. Thus during the past year both Dr. Lewis and Dr. Elliott were attached as whole-time workers to University College Hospital, and other whole-time workers pursue their researches at Cambridge, Oxford, and St.

Bartholomew's Hospital. In the second place, the Committee assists organised research already in progress at different universities and medical schools by means of grants made in payment for part-time work. We are glad to see that the Committee declares its desire to assist in this manner the work of the units which are being formed in London for higher clinical teaching and research.

The record of work for the past year must be regarded as highly creditable and a striking testimony to the value of the aid which the Committee has been able to render. Scarcely any aspect of medical science has been left untouched. Collective investigations have been undertaken on tuberculosis, on dysentery, on typhoid and paratyphoid, on the treatment of wounds, and on cerebro-spinal fever and influenza. Fundamental problems of nutrition have been attacked especially by the Committee on Accessory Food Factors, which has carried out researches not only in this country, but also in Vienna, and thrown much light on the causation of rickets and on the factors concerned in normal growth. The investigation of the disorders of the cardio-vascular system, including the causation of soldier's heart (in which such valuable results were attained during the war), has been continued, and a special department for this purpose has been instituted under the care of Dr. Lewis. The research into trench nephritis is being continued by Dr. MacLean and extended to include all forms of nephritis. The report records also the results of researches on the effects of oxygen lack, on chronic arthritis, on wound shock, on industrial fatigue, and on many other subjects.

The great value of the Committee's work is that in a time of transition, when the community is slowly awakening to the value and necessity of research in medicine, but has not yet provided the necessary organisation and support, it is making it possible for practically all provided with the necessary intellectual endowments to take up scientific work, at any rate for a time. No doubt many of these workers will later pass into practice; but the Committee by its action is creating a reserve of scientific workers, from which the country will be able to draw its teachers and teams of research workers, when once it recognises the need for them and is prepared to provide such salaries that a man can devote himself to the advancement of knowledge without taking vows of celibacy and poverty. There will always be a small handful of men in every country who will devote their lives to this cause. Faradays, however, are few and far between, and the vast majority of men of first-class intelligence are not prepared to make the supreme sacrifice. The country has need of these men to fill its depleted ranks of scientific workers, academic and industrial, but it will not obtain their services until it can provide a career in science equal in status and remuneration to that afforded by other professions.

<sup>1</sup> National Health Insurance. Fifth Annual Report of the Medical Research Committee, 1918-19. Pp. 90. (London: H.M. Stationery Office.)