

SOCIAL MEDICINE OF OLD AGE

THE Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation have published a report on the social medicine of old age prepared by Dr. J. H. Sheldon in a survey of a random sample of 477 old people*. His object was "to discover the medical and mental condition of old people living at home, and the stresses and strains to which both they and the younger people caring for them may be subject". The survey forms an appendix to the report entitled "Old Age", published by a Survey Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Seeborn Rowntree. Wolverhampton was one of the towns covered by the Rowntree Report, and the same sample of people has provided the material for the new survey. The town, which has a population of 150,000, was selected because it was large enough to ensure a fair mixture of all income classes and sufficiently compact to enable the compiler to undertake the amount of visiting involved. Old age for the purposes of the survey has been taken to begin at sixty for women and sixty-five for men. The sample was obtained from the register of ration cards, every thirtieth name in the selected age group being included in the survey.

The earlier chapters of the report deal with what the author describes as the natural history of old age, and cover an assessment of the old person's health, ability to move about, the nature and extent of any illness, susceptibility to loneliness, extent of dependence on others for nursing care, shopping, housework and cooking, difficulties in climbing stairs, queueing, moving among traffic or in the dark and liability to fall. The analysis of the physical state of the subjects was based on a case-history supplied by the subjects themselves and by relatives, or in some cases by their general practitioners. No clinical examination of the subjects was possible, and for this reason the data permit no very accurate estimate of the nature of any existing disability. In particular, no precise evaluation can be made of the diseases and functional impairments which are specific to old age, or of the contributory factors involved in the phenomenon of senescence. The remainder of the report makes a valuable analysis of the ecology of old age; that is, its relation with the rest of the community, and the mutual stresses and strains set up.

One of the important points which emerges is the fundamental importance of the family in the social biology of old age. The problems of old people in the mass are domestic rather than institutional. The author favours the provision of temporary hostel accommodation which would enable those normally responsible for their care to obtain occasional relief. Another aspect which is referred to is the provision of old people's dwellings specially designed and carefully sited in building schemes of the future. The possibility of living in the environment to which they are accustomed, of having something to do, and of being still able to feel necessary to the world are of the greatest importance to old people, and may help to explain why the mental level of old people living in their homes appears to be so much better than that of those living in institutions. The sense of loneliness of old people and the disabilities which are inherent in old age are most successfully mitigated where children or relatives live in close proximity.

* The Social Medicine of Old Age: Report of an Inquiry in Wolverhampton. By Dr. J. H. Sheldon. (Survey Committee on the Problems of Ageing and the Care of Old People: Medical Subcommittee on the Causes and Results of Ageing.) (Published for the Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation.) Pp. x+240. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948.) 5s. net.

This mode of life seems most satisfactory to both generations since it enables the old people to preserve their independence and the married children to live a separate life, while at the same time ensuring that help is at hand in time of need. There is, however, a darker side to the picture. Many old people, especially women, were found to be carrying a burden in the management of the home, and in some cases in the nursing of a sick husband, which was clearly beyond their capacity. In other cases the care of aged parents imposes a strain on the younger generation which is almost intolerable.

The findings of the report are not necessarily applicable to other towns, and no final conclusions can be drawn from the data which have been obtained. Nevertheless, the report is of value in directing attention to the kind of problems which besets old age and in indicating some of the ways in which these problems can be met. In a population such as that of Great Britain, where the age distribution is moving upwards, there is a clear need for further study of old age.

RECENT RESEARCHES ON FOOD

THE first report of the Food Investigation Board since 1938 has only recently appeared*; but readers of scientific journals have been able to follow the work that has been done through the publication of separate papers on particular aspects of the work. The public in general has had a close acquaintance with the results of the work—if not of the work itself—in the war-time dehydrated foods and the special packagings that were adopted. Probably, however, few of those who complained about their dried egg and their household milk realized the amount of work that had gone into making it possible for us to have these foods at all. Here now is a chance for them to learn something of what was done on their behalf, for the successful application of the research findings was the result of close co-operation between the Board and the Ministry of Food.

The present report includes a summary of the work done during the years 1940-45 and a more detailed report for 1946, when the urgency of the war years had lessened and it was possible to resume "a more balanced and diversified programme of research which includes a fair proportion of longer range and more fundamental studies". This year also saw the reopening of the two 'market' laboratories, at Smithfield and at Covent Garden. The Torry Fisheries Research Station had been active throughout.

During the war years problems connected with the dehydration of foodstuffs and their subsequent use took first place—of necessity, since smallness of bulk was of particular importance in transport and storage. Now, however, there is opportunity once again to study such matters as the ripening and storage of fresh fruit and vegetables, the smoking and salting of fresh fish, freezing techniques and the composition of fresh carcasses.

The work of the Food Investigation Board covers a multitude of problems arising from the processing, packaging, transport and storage of foodstuffs. Already we are a far cry from the primitive producer-consumer community whose diet is subject to very marked seasonal variations and shortages. All the work

* Food Investigation, 1940-46. Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. Pp. 42. (London: H.M.S.O., 1948.)

described in this report exemplifies man's increasing control over his environment and heralds a time when all foods will be available at all times and always in their most palatable and nutritional forms. (It will make life easy for the dietitians, but I wonder if it may not prove a little dull!)

However, that time is not yet, and meanwhile much of importance is being discovered. It is only to be expected, in view of the variety of problems that have to be tackled, that progress towards their solution is sometimes held up by lack of data on some fundamental issue. But a glance over the titles of the papers which have been published shows that even under war-time conditions these additional problems were tackled as they came, and in many cases a considerable advance was made in our understanding of the chemistry and physics of biological processes.

One of the most interesting points of advance—and the one which seems to have attracted most attention from other workers—was “the discovery of the reversible formation of starch from glucose-1-phosphate”. A preliminary report on this work appeared in *Nature* of March 23, 1940, p. 451. No less important, however, are the contributions in other fields: the study of mucoproteins, of the chemical changes accompanying the development of rigor mortis, the general problem of the denaturation of proteins, the characterization of the components of connective tissue, the cause and cure of the lessening in biological value of milk powder stored with too high a moisture content.

None of this work is reported in full in this publication. For details the reader must refer to individual papers published in various scientific journals (references are given in full). This report is merely the outline picture; but worthy of attention at that. It is a good example of science applied for the benefit of mankind and of the value of close co-operation between the scientific worker in the laboratory and the trader and administrator in the field. This co-operation was largely brought about by the urgent needs imposed by war-time conditions; it is to be hoped that it may still be maintained now that the need is less obvious than it was.

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WORLD ECONOMIC SURVEY

THE broadsheet “World Economic Survey”, issued as No. 283 by Political and Economic Planning, gives a very useful and concise summary of two large and valuable reports produced by the Department of Economic Affairs of the United Nations Organisation. This Department is carrying on the essential functions of the Economic, Financial and Transit Department of the League of Nations, which issued almost as its swan song the “World Economic Survey, 1942–44”. The comprehensive picture which that report gave of the world economic situation on the eve of victory was supplemented by two other reports, “Commercial Policy in the Post-war World” and “The Cause and Control of Inflation”, the former reviewing the problem of post-war trade policies and trade relationships and the latter monetary experience in Europe after the First World War, which especially for their review of the inter-war years are almost equally valuable in providing the background for the discussions of the Economic and Social

Council and the Economic Commission for Europe, which it is the prime purpose of the two new reports to provide. These reports, “Economic Report: Salient Features of the World Economic Situation 1945–1947”, with a subsequent supplement, and “A Survey of the Economic Situation and Prospects of Europe”, are also intended to find their way into the universities and libraries, and the summary provided by P.E.P. will indicate to the industrialist the extent of the assistance they can give them as well as the economist and research worker.

The European survey provides the more precise and detailed body of information; the most notable feature of the industrial progress of the European countries is the extent to which recovery was retarded in 1947. Agricultural recovery since 1945 has been less satisfactory than in the corresponding period after the First World War, and the volume of food imports into Europe was running in 1947 at about 10 per cent below the pre-war level. The scanty evidence available suggests that, in Europe as a whole, industrial output per man-hour was lower than before the War. The foreign trade of European countries expanded only moderately in 1947 after a rapid recovery in 1946, and an unsatisfactory feature was the sharp decline in intra-European exchanges of food, coal and other essential goods, while trade in luxury products increased. Little hope is entertained that imports of foodstuffs and raw materials can be reduced below pre-war levels, and restoration of equilibrium in Europe's external balance of payments will require a concentrated effort over a period of years. Success depends on the conquest of open or suppressed inflation, the restoration of trade within Europe to pre-war levels and a further expansion of production of the right kind of goods. The survey concludes that, given the continuation of the present high levels of employment, the prospects of attaining the existing production targets for the early 1950's are not unpromising, provided that intra-European trade and credit arrangements can be developed sufficiently to permit a more rational utilization of European resources, and that financial difficulties do not interrupt the flow of overseas supplies.

As regards the rest of the world, while the population is almost 10 per cent greater than ten years ago, food production is still well below pre-war levels, and even if the high hopes for harvests in 1948 are realized, serious deficiencies will remain. Reduction in livestock population is adversely affecting soil fertility and crop yields. Latin-American countries have all suffered from inflation, and the high prices of foodstuffs have lowered the standards of living of many of the inhabitants. Prospects for output and exports of primary commodities other than food in Asia and the Far East are still not very bright, and production, transport and administration will have to be improved greatly before Far Eastern foreign trade is likely to meet the needs of the situation. Areas of Africa which suffered heavily during the War have made marked recoveries, although agricultural output has tended to lag behind the increases in population. Apart from cereal shortages, Africa's most serious problem is the shortage of textiles. The level of industrial production in Australia and New Zealand has been high, but both countries are suffering from shortage of dollars. Both are anxious to continue industrialization, but to do this must promote a high level of immigration. The survey also throws a little light on the disruption of Soviet economy by the War, and the extent of its recovery.