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## Health Visitors League

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### A Dream that may come True

by

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Since ancient times, and all the world over, people have dreamed of a paradise on earth, cattle and green pastures, and the promise of a peaceful, long and happy life.

For centuries travellers sought this paradise in tropical and sub-tropical lands but what they most often found were misery and frightening diseases like leprosy, yaws or malaria. They heard stories of how the envious gods had sent pestilences to carry off half the population at a time. Frequently they found starvation—even now malnutrition is only too common in many countries. Everywhere they found that, to make sure that one son should survive to scatter the ashes of his parents, mothers had to go through a dozen childbirths before dying of exhaustion at the age of 30.

#### A dream that is coming true

Man, like the animals, has instincts and habits which keep him strong and healthy, or at least alive, until he has produced offspring. But in the last hundred years, and especially during the last ten years, man has forged a new and better instrument for survival, called science.

Scientific experiment has deepened our knowledge and our understanding and even failures and mistakes have taught their lessons.

Better knowledge has brought better health. Life is becoming longer and healthier in place after place, and man

seems to have found out how to make his dream of a paradise on earth come true.

Let us see some of the ways in which science has opened up these new possibilities. The principal instruments have been improved health services and health centres, the control of disease, and above all health education.

#### Health centres

Expectant mothers visit health centres to make sure that their pregnancy is proceeding normally. After birth, infants are brought to the health centres so that their growth can be watched and any difficulties dealt with. Trained health visitors from the centres go into the homes to give help and advice. After the first year the children's health is again checked by experts. The same holds true for pre-school-age children, school children and adolescents. The experienced eye of the expert detects, in good time, potential causes of ill-health before they produce evil effects.

The watchword of public health services is prevention.

Health services are concerned with health in industry, in sport and in old age. They are ready with help and advice whenever an individual is worried about his health. Essential to all these activities are efforts to improve people's knowledge on health matters.

Health education of the public is a powerful instrument and is particularly important for politicians, journalists,

parents and teachers.

### **The health team**

The modern health movement requires the combined work of a health team of doctors, nurses, technicians of many kinds and auxiliaries who are joined by pharmacologists, veterinarians, engineers and other specialists. Today, almost everyone is concerned in one way or another with health work—or ought to be.

How do young people become members of such a health team? Doctors generally have had a training period of at least six years and up to ten if they wish to specialize. Nurses, after their ordinary schooling, are trained from three to five years or longer if specialized, while auxiliaries, after an elementary school education, are trained for from one to two years.

These health workers are able to draw upon a great body of scientific knowledge but even more will be needed before full health can be won. There are many diseases but only one state of full health.

### **The rules of health**

An important part of the work of these health teams is to teach about health habits—those of the individual, the family, the community and the whole state. Nowadays, these rules of hygiene have become very complicated. Here are a few examples.

The agents of infectious disease, such as protozoa, bacteria, or viruses, are hiding in human beings, in domestic animals, or in other hosts or media which are part of man's environment. A whole science has been evolved to protect humanity against them.

One method is to increase human resistance through vaccination. Each country must decide what vaccines are to be used and when. In some countries the programme starts at the very dawn of life, with BCG vaccination against tuberculosis. This is followed by the triple vaccine against diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus and, subsequently, by polio and smallpox vaccination. All these are given before school age. In some regions cholera vaccination is the most important.

### **Insects that carry disease**

Insects such as the malaria mosquito have been attacked with insecticides during the last ten years throughout many parts of the world in an attempt to eradicate the diseases they carry. One of the principal tasks of the World Health Organization has been to initiate and co-ordinate such campaigns and to help make them successful. The present world-wide malaria eradication campaign sponsored by WHO is one of the most dramatic instances of this type of work.

On the other hand, the disease organisms which exist in water, in the soil or in the air are fought through cleanliness. Many of these escape from the body of a sick person through the nose and mouth when he coughs, sneezes or spits, or from a sore place on his skin, or with his bodily excreta. This can happen during the incubation period of the disease even before the person feels sick, while "carriers" can spread the disease organism without themselves being ill.

There are also about 70 infectious diseases that we have in common with animals, especially domesticated ones, and that we catch from them in much the same way.

Cleanliness is therefore the first health rule. Keep clear from secretions and excretions; don't infect other persons or pollute the environment.

### **Eating healthy food**

From the study of what are called "deficiency diseases" we have learnt little by little about all the various amino-acids, minerals and vitamins which must be present in our food to keep us strong and healthy. As yet, we do not know enough about the composition of various foodstuffs to make the best choice, but we do know enough generally to prevent under-nourishment and nutritional diseases. In the main, the nutritional problems of today are practical problems of education as regards diet, of agricultural production, and of transport.

The United Nations Children's Fund has made a contribution of the first order by distributing powdered milk for

mothers, infants and small children, particularly in populations which do not obtain enough good protein food. This, however, can be only a temporary measure and a permanent solution must be found in the local production of the right foods. In this field the Food and Agriculture Organization is active.

#### **Preventing accidents**

In earlier times accidents were caused by wild animals, human violence, or natural catastrophes such as floods and earthquakes. Although these are still ever-present dangers, particularly at certain times and in certain regions, today there are other health dangers due mainly to technical advances. These include atomic radiation which menaces both the present and future generations, road accidents, train accidents and air accidents. There are also the accidents which happen in the home through fire and through the misuse of chemicals and medicines.

It is one of the duties of the public health team to impress upon the general public and also upon the law-makers the need to take every possible precaution against such calamities. Parents have a particular responsibility here.

#### **A healthy mind**

An important part of public health work is concerned with mental balance and mental hygiene. The more complicated daily life becomes, the harder it is for the young to adjust their behaviour to it. No wonder that we have more "difficult children".

By studying their reactions at special consultations we are beginning to learn more about mental hygiene. It will soon be a most important part of the work in all health centres to spread the principles of mental hygiene and thus help the individual to create good mental habits. Only in this way can we hope to have well-adapted citizens in a united world where conflicts of interests in the beginning will still be numerous.

#### **Experts and the new world**

There are some people, calling them-

selves realists, who tell us that we need not pay special attention to health problems because these, they allege, will be automatically solved in the process of technical and economic development. In a well-planned and prosperous economy, it is certainly easier to avoid infections, malnutrition and the other evils that follow poverty and distress. This is true, however, only for an enlightened, educated and disciplined population.

The new world has to be built with the help of many experts, but the health experts are among the most necessary if a long, healthy and happy life is to be made possible for all mankind.

Among the international organizations with responsibility for building a better world, the World Health Organization ranks high. During its first ten years it has achieved some startling successes. For example, in certain areas of the world, endemic yaws has been eradicated by one injection of penicillin for each person treated. Equally, the cycle of malaria infection has been broken in many places by spraying homes and other buildings with insecticides, such as DDT and, in several regions, malaria has already been eradicated. Such successes are encouraging.

In the long run, however, an even more important task is to build strong health services everywhere, served by sufficient health centres and medical teams to make the general public "health conscious". In this the support of teachers, journalists and politicians is needed.

#### **New problem arise**

The realization of this aim is not easy. In every country the same problems present themselves in different ways. As one disease is eradicated, one problem solved, others grow in importance. A longer life brings with it special problems connected with old age.

The lesson of the last ten years of health progress is nevertheless clear. Health for all is no longer an unattainable ideal, but an everyday reality well within man's grasp.