

The Century of the Child

BY

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"The Twentieth Century is the Century of the Child," it has been said. It is true certainly that the present century has been a revolution in maternal and child health services in many countries.

Throughout history and up to the latter part of the nineteenth century it was usual for an average family of six or eight children to lose two or three of them in infancy or childhood. The survivors frequently began working long hours at a tender age, and in many cases, were stunted in growth through poor food, sickness and lack of care.

Compare this with the situation today in those countries where fewer than 50 babies die out of every thousand live births, where mothers can receive free medical attention both before and after the birth of a child, and where hundreds of medical men and women and nurses specialise in the science of keeping children healthy.

We must face the fact that in many Asian countries there has been but little such progress, while there are few statistics by which to measure what progress has been achieved. By and large it is safe to say that in very few Asian countries has the infant mortality rate been reduced below 200 per thousand live births, or one death among every five births. There is a correspondingly serious degree of sickness, mal-nutrition and under development in children of all ages.

This is a poor foundation on which to try to build a health and prosperous future in which political independence can bear its full fruits.

The root causes of this sad state of affairs are to be found in the low level of education—especially in village populations—and in unhealthy conditions in the home and in the community, often but not always associated with low economic status. When, for instance, animals and human beings live under the same roof, flies

swarm on food and on the children's faces and it is well-nigh impossible for the house to be clean and healthy. If mothers have to slave in field and factory, children are dirty and clothes are unwashed. Still greater hazards for the health of a community arise from inadequate and impure water, lack of facilities for night-soil disposal, unprotected food, and unswept streets. Much is being done and much more must be done by governments to provide better sanitation and better health services, but bad health conditions cannot be blamed entirely on government inactivity. A great improvement can be brought about at reasonable cost within each community and within each family.

Let us see briefly what are the main factors in ensuring that children grow up healthy and strong and able to become first-class citizens.

Prenatal Care.

First, the health of the mother during pregnancy is decisive for the proper development of the child. To keep healthy at this time she must know certain rules about what to eat and how to look after herself. Prenatal clinics, where they exist, are of great help to her.

The Midwife.

Many lives, both of mothers and children, are lost owing to unskilled care at the time of birth. In most Asian countries, increasing attention is now being paid to training midwives and educating mothers to make full use of their services, as well as to establishing free maternity clinics.

The first year of life is a crucial period, especially in conditions of poverty, overcrowding, bad housing and lack of hygiene. A very important single factor is however the ignorance of the parents concerning proper care of the infant. Here education is the paramount need. In general, a great improvement in the health of new-born babies is found where there are proper clinics for mothers to attend when their

children are not well and where they can receive necessary advice to keep the infant from sickness. Such clinics generally provide also a home-visiting service by public health nurses who follow up all cases and teach parents the elements of child care.

Prevention of Disease.

It cannot too often be repeated that most of the diseases from which babies and children suffer are preventable. It is disastrous to see how many children of school age have lost their sight due to sore eyes and trachoma, smallpox, food deficiency or congenital syphilis. There is absolutely no excuse for parents who neglect to have their children vaccinated now that free vaccination services are available almost everywhere. A simple penicillin treatment during pregnancy which should be provided at all prenatal clinics will practically guarantee that a child is born free from syphilis infection. BCG vaccination is increasingly available to protect children against the risk of tuberculosis. Cleanliness in the home, protection of food from flies and care in boiling milk and water will prevent most dysenteries and intestinal diseases, as well as avoiding worms. Proper personal cleanliness will protect against scabies and other skin diseases. Here again, while much remains to be done by public health authorities, the main need is to teach parents the quite simple health rules to be observed in the home.

Nutrition.

Sometimes children are badly fed because their parents cannot give them enough to eat. Very often however children are ailing and unhealthy simply because they are getting the wrong kind of food. Young breast-fed babies are generally in excellent condition, but mother's milk alone is not sufficient after 6 months of age. Weaning is often postponed until the second year of life, sometimes owing to the lack of other food.

Even if started at the proper time solid foods such as cereals are often given in indigestible form and vitamin deficiencies occur owing to insufficient fruit and vegetables.

School Health.

The child is still a child when he is at school, and a properly organised school health service can definitely assist in the development of the child and also counteract the effects of parent's ignorance and neglect. The schools for both boys and girls which now-a-days are rapidly increasing in numbers in many Asian countries, provide the best opportunity of teaching the future mothers and fathers the basic rules for healthy living. Teachers are co-operative, and the children are clever to learn and accept new ideas, but a certain basic material such as posters, charts, and illustrated text-books is needed.

South-East Asia is awakening to the need of good services to care for its mothers and children as part of every overall health programme. It has the advantage of being able to benefit from the vast experience already gained in this field in many parts of the world since the beginning of the century, thus avoiding many initial mistakes. Even more important, it can build its public health development on the solid foundation of an existing strong family and community life, which forms the best soil in which children can grow with a sense of personal security.

In their endeavours to build up a healthy and happy new generation, governments have the full support and practical assistance of international bodies like the World Health Organisation which declares in its Constitution that "Healthy development of the child is of basic importance; the ability to live harmoniously in a changing total environment is essential to such development."