

THE PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS.

BY

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IT seems incredible in this day of enlightenment, when the words "prevention" and "conservation" represent the motive power for most movements affecting public welfare, that about 40 per cent., or nearly one-half, of the blindness of the world is unnecessary.

That humane and intelligent people can continue year by year to allow the ranks of the needlessly blind steadily to be recruited, is past understanding. But they are doing so the world over, and as a result we find in every country, state, county and borough numberless victims blighted, handicapped, despairing, groping their way through a life of endless night instead of walking gladly in the sunshine.

This astounding situation naturally gives rise to two questions: "What causes this unnecessary blindness?" and "How can it be prevented?"

To the first we answer, "The causes are numerous and varied, among them being industrial accidents, accidents at play, sequelæ of various infectious diseases, sympathetic inflammations, syphilis, hereditary and acquired, progressive myopia, trachoma and ophthalmia neonatorum."

To the second we reply that unnecessary blindness resulting from these causes may be prevented "through supplanting ignorance of them by knowledge," "neglect of eye diseases by treatment of them," "utter carelessness where the eyes are concerned by thoughtful care," and by heeding the wisdom of the old saying that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

These remedies may seem to savor of Utopian ideals, but the proof that they are practical is in this, that since the public has been alive to the fact that much blindness may be prevented, the interest in this appealing work has swept, wave-like, over practically all civilized countries, the approach to reform being made through investigation, educational and publicity work first and foremost, which paves the way for desired legislation, and through "co-operation of all organizations and individuals working toward the elimination of those causes which militate against the common weal," particularly those vitally interested in child rescue work in its phases.

Since more unnecessary blindness is due to ophthalmia neonatorum, or "babies' sore eyes," than to any other one cause, and since the prophylaxis against this disease is so simple and inexpensive as to make the occurrence of a single case a disgrace to an enlightened people, efforts thus far to prevent blindness have been directed almost entirely toward the elimination of this cause alone.

The first step necessary was to ascertain just what is the exact nature of the problem, in order that a solution to it might be discovered.

It was learned that ophthalmia neonatorum, or "inflammation of the eyes of the new-born," "cold in the eyes," etc., is a definite infection, due to any one of several organisms, but most frequently the gonococcus, entering the infant's eyes during or soon after birth, and that this disease will not "get well of itself," but develops with all the rapidity of any other virulent infection, causing ulceration of the cornea and subsequent total blindness, unless skilful medical treatment is instituted early, since the disease works its destruction in a very few days.

Prof. Crede, at Leipzig, found that about 10 per cent. of the infants born under his observation suffered from ophthalmia neonatorum, and Sidney Stephenson claims that one-third of the blindness of the world is due to this disease. Figures from the schools for the blind in this and other countries to-day still substantiate this claim. It is impossible, therefore, to estimate the importance of Prof. Crede's discovery in 1881, that the instillation of a drop of a 2 per cent. solution of silver nitrate into the eyes of the new-born* would prevent ophthalmia neonatorum, for the value of this information can only be expressed in terms descriptive of lives which might have been filled with happiness and usefulness, instead of unjustly handicapped by impaired or total loss of vision.

Although Prof. Crede made this invaluable contribution to human knowledge nearly thirty years ago, the public is but just beginning to apply it effectively. Since children are constantly going blind from ophthalmia neonatorum in every country, it is evident that this simple prophylactic treatment is not being universally employed. There's the pity! and human beings are being deprived of a precious birthright because of ignorance or neglect or both.

The task before us, then, is to continue to enlighten more and more of the public at large as to the seriousness and preventability of this disease, so that doctors and midwives will find themselves in disrepute if blindness or impaired vision resulting from ophthalmia neonatorum occurs in their practices.

Moreover, the conservation of sight should be made compulsory on the part of the State, for the infant citizen is equally entitled with the adult to its protection against any assaults of ignorance or neglect which threaten his economic efficiency and well-being for life.

Through legislation there should be provision for free distribution of a prophylactic solution, with directions for use; for early and accurate notification of births and a report as to whether or not prophylactic measures have been employed at that time; for the education, registration and supervision of

* This treatment has been modified by different obstetricians and ophthalmologists, and we find to-day that silver nitrate, 1 per cent., is commonly used, one application dropped into each eye; also, argyrol, protargol and other derivatives of the silver salts are used, but the essentials of the Crede method remain unchanged

midwives; and last, but not least, for provision, at public expense if necessary, for prompt and efficient care of patients suffering from ophthalmia neonatorum which disease should be placed upon the list of those reportable under penalty of the law.

Initial steps have been taken for the accomplishment of these ends through organized work which is being carried on in six States (in the United States of America), and less formal work in several others, while in many countries of the Old World, midwives have long since been under State supervision and control, as one important step toward prevention of infant mortality, physical degeneracy, idiocy and blindness.

For the prevention of blindness resulting from trachoma, industrial accidents, etc., methods much the same as those in use in all forms of public betterment work—*viz.*, investigation, education, legislation and co-operation—will probably be employed.

The last, however, has proved to be the key to the situation which at present occupies our attention, for it is only through hearty co-operation of the medical profession and the lay public, of legislators, educators, sanitarians, philanthropists, the clergy and all others who deplore human suffering and incapacity, working together, that the desired end will be accomplished. Then we shall look with horror upon the time when we had in our midst those most-to-be-pitied victims—the needlessly blind.

“Many of the wisest of men and women have said that talk about the powers and position of women is nearly useless, because all human beings take rank, in the long run, according to their capability. But it is true, and will remain true, that what women are able to do they will do, with or without leave obtained from men. Florence Nightingale encountered opposition—from her own sex as much as the other; and she achieved, as the most natural thing in the world, and without the smallest sacrifice of her womanly quality, what would beforehand have been declared a deed for a future age.”

“She was no declaimer, but a housewifely woman; she talked little, and did great things. When other women see that there are things for them to do, and train themselves to the work, they will get it done easily enough. There can never be a more unthought-of and marvellous career before any working woman than Florence Nightingale has achieved; and her success has opened a way to all others easier than anyone had prepared for her.”

HARRIET MARTINEAU.
