

THE TYPHOID TOLL.*

By George A. Johnson.

CERTAIN cardinal facts stand forth in opening a discussion of the significance of typhoid fever. First of all, let it be clearly understood that there is no question of its being an entirely preventable disease. Second that all typhoid is caused by taking the typhoid germ into the mouth. And, third, that typhoid fever in America is the chief disease conveyed by impure food and drink.

These premises stated, let us go a little further in the line of elaborating on these basic facts. Since the disease cannot be contracted naturally without taking the specific germ into the mouth, and since the manner in which this act is commonly performed can be said to be associated almost exclusively with the consumption of typhoid infected food and drink, it follows that to eradicate the disease involves only the exercise of really simple measures of precaution, which, in the concrete, are to see to it that the food and drink be pure, or made pure, and kept pure until consumed. Public understanding of this need is, of course, in the ideal sense, imperative, but when once the typhoid scourge has been placed under control, it is possible for public health authorities to prevent the reestablishment of its sinister influences on the public health, in spite of the ignorance, selfishness, or almost unbelievably complacent tolerance of the public itself.

It is not for a moment denied that to effect this idealistic result is an undertaking beset with tremendous difficulties. The public is not to be blamed unqualifiedly for individual or collective responsibility in the maintenance of this filth disease among human kind. Education must be forced upon the public by those qualified to teach; public health officials must be given wider power through more exact and far-reaching laws aimed at the destruction of the roots of this filth-sustained plant; and ample funds must be appropriated to carry through the work. The vital capital needlessly dissipated by the typhoid scourge in this country amounts each year to not less than \$150,000,000, yet the combined annual appropriations for all the health departments of the cities of the United States amount to less than 30 cents per capita, or not more than \$15,000,000. This fund is made to cover the expenses of work on infant morbidity, inspection of school children, laboratory and dispensary service, tuberculosis, and for educational and publicity work, and this sum is clearly inadequate for the efficient prosecution of tuberculosis work alone. In New York City a very large share of the expense of such work is borne by the Department of Charities. Probably not 10 per cent. of the health department funds are devoted to holding typhoid fever in check; the prevention fund, if you like. Such an amount would be equal to 1 per cent. of the loss suffered through failure to exercise adequate and efficient measures of prevention.

If the adjuster of a municipal or state budget were knowingly threatened with illness, or one of his immediate family so affected, he would not hesitate to spend any reasonable sum of money to defray the cost of obviously necessary preventive measures. Life insurance certainly is popular, and it is not to be supposed that the officials of city and state finance departments are immune to the persuasive arguments of life insurance

agents. This is protection against the effects of disease; nevertheless, such officials wield an energetic blue pencil when they reach the health department item in the annual budget. They cannot see the return of good to the public, even though they realize the protection afforded to themselves and their families from their life insurance, or they would not pay the premiums.

Twenty millions of people in the United States are now being furnished with filtered water at a cost not exceeding \$8,000,000, or 40 cents per capita, per year, and in these cities having filtered supplies the water-borne typhoid fever has been practically eliminated, as reliable statistics abundantly prove. Inexpensive as water purification is, these people are spending more money for that alone than they appropriate for the work of prevention and public treatment of all diseases, whether water-borne or not, and it is not to be forgotten that out of the public health fund comes a considerable expenditure for work in the line of the conservation of purity of public water supplies.

The results of water purification always show a big balance on the right side of the ledger. Where one dollar is spent for pure water, many dollars are saved in the form of vital capital through the prevention of sickness and death. If a community of 19,000 people spends each year 40 cents per capita for filtered water, and thus each year prevents a single death and the attendant cases of illness from typhoid fever, it will come out even financially, and increase its self-respect into the bargain. In Pittsburgh, to cite a well-known example, the adoption of water filtration has saved over 600 lives, 9,000 cases of typhoid illness, and \$4,500,000 in vital capital annually.

Whose is the responsibility? Who can be blamed for permitting typhoid fever to exist and thrive in this enlightened age? Is it the national government, the state governments, the municipal governments, or the people themselves? There is no law prohibiting the consumption of impure water or food unless the consumer deliberately contemplates suicide.

A community may start out with the best intentions. Legislative enactments are put through to protect the public health. This is simple, for none but the framers of health laws really know what they signify, hence there arises no antagonism to their enactment. Next comes the task of obtaining the necessary funds to enforce these laws. The average appropriation of all the cities where such funds are made available is, in round numbers, 30 cents per capita per annum. This applies only to those cities having populations of 25,000 or more. What of the remainder?

Let any thinking citizen ask himself if he considers a contribution of 30 cents each year on his part sufficient justification for his assurance of protection against preventable disease. Or, as another example, if he thinks, if given in charity, it is his proper share toward the fund for keeping in check and preventing the spread of the great white plague, which kills 130,000 people in America each year. Unquestioningly, he would give far more to street beggars in the course of a year. If every man, woman and child in the United States contributed one dollar each year to public health work, the total sum thus raised would not nearly equal the annual loss in vital capital in this country from typhoid fever alone. Not one city in America does contribute one dollar per capita for all the uses of its health department, but on an average contributes the far-famed thirty cents, which is opprobrium enough.

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