

There can be no question that the chief reason for the present very unsatisfactory state of affairs lies not in any defect of the Act, nor of the Board of Control; but in the neglect of the local authorities to administer the Act. This is shown by the fact that although the Exchequer was prepared to pay the sum of £150,000 per annum to local authorities for this purpose, in the year 1917 only £79,000, a little more than half this sum, was actually utilized. There are, it is true, some authorities who have realized the importance of, and discharged, their duties; indeed these have been unable to cope with all the urgent cases in their area for the reason that they have exhausted the sum allocated to them by the Treasury, and a reconsideration of the financial arrangements of the Act is a pressing need; but the majority of local authorities have been content to let the administration of the Act remain in abeyance, and I cannot but feel that this is a most shortsighted policy and one which is the reverse of economical. There are, of course, many social problems which the nation would not be justified in spending time and money and energy upon, whilst it is engaged in this terrible war—they may well wait until the return of peace; but it is very doubtful whether the problem of the mentally defective is one of them, and the question of such of these persons as have contracted, or are even likely to contract, venereal disease, is certainly not. It is very necessary, therefore, that every effort should be made to impress the importance of this matter upon local authorities, and that they should be urged to discharge their duty, alike to the mentally defective and to the nation, in this matter. This neglect is chiefly, if not entirely, due to the fact that the members of these authorities have not hitherto realized the gravity of the question, and I believe that this only requires to be brought to their notice to result in the necessary action being taken. The great defects at the present time are that we are practically quite out of official touch with the great mass of mental defectives who are at large, that we neither know who nor where they are, that we have no system for finding out or for exercising supervision over their movements, and that there is a woeful inadequacy of suitable accommodation for such as should be placed in institutions. The case I have already mentioned illustrates the danger which results from the great difficulty and delay in finding vacancies in institutions. For these reasons I am of the opinion that the matters which should and could be dealt with at the present time are; firstly, the ascertainment by each local authority of all the defective persons within its area; secondly, an adequate system of oversight by suitable visitors; and thirdly, the provision of accommodation for those whose liberty is a danger either to themselves or to the community. Many of the more urgent cases come, at some time or other, within such institutions as prisons, workhouses, lock hospitals and rescue