

THE SANITARY REVIEW

SHOULD THE QUESTION OF PUBLIC HEALTH BE SUBJECT TO THE VOTE OF THE PEOPLE?

In Canada at the present time any community may by vote choose whether a proportion of its population shall die of typhoid fever or escape.

Again and again we have examples of communities drinking absolutely polluted water, suffering from an abnormally high typhoid rate, simply because a majority of the people are ignorant, selfish, and content, and there exists no legislative machinery making hygiene compulsory.

Education is compulsory. To shoot oneself or one's neighbor is illegal and punishable. To purchase poison and administer it to one's neighbor is a crime. To poison your neighbor's water supply and kill him with typhoid, and to poison your own water supply and kill yourself with typhoid, are legal methods of committing murder or suicide. Yes, legal, if when the time comes to vote the money to prevent the murder or suicide the community decides to keep the money in their pockets.

Towns could be mentioned galore where the people know that the whole of their town site is sewage infected. They know, and it has been pointed out time after time, that the normal chlorine content of the ground water is, say, eight parts in 1,000,000; and yet analyses of the well waters show contents from 20 to 60 of chlorine, accountable by nothing else than sewage.

We have in mind such a town not sixty miles from Toronto, where typhoid is periodically breaking out; where the Provincial Board of Health have condemned the water of practically every well sample sent to them; where they have an abundance of the finest drinking water in easy and practical distance; where the minority of the inhabitants are alive to the situation; where the council have spent several hundred dollars in formulating and presenting a practical scheme; where the scheme has had the full sanction of the Provincial Board of Health; where the whole town is held up and is stagnant for want of a public water supply; where, on a vote being taken to spend a sum which would add two mills to the tax rate, the majority chose to continue to drink polluted water, remain stagnant, and take a chance with the typhoid lottery.

Nothing can be done except educate the public, wait, and re-submit another by-law in the future. Rubbish, foolishness, communal suicide, and sacrifice to a democratic fetish!

If a man chooses to purchase arsenic and poisons another, do you take time to educate him to a better view of ethics? No; you hang him.

If a community chooses to discharge its intestinal filth, laden with disease germs, into a communal stream, thus poisoning others, do you hang it? No; you commence a slow process of education. You try to make them see the error of their ways. Rubbish! They are never educated. You can no more interpenetrate their minds with the principles of cause and effect than you can make them complete bacteriologists. You can frighten them—at least nature can frighten them by killing a few—score, all in a bunch, with typhoid. And so it goes jogging along. In spite of your Provincial Boards of Health, your experimentalists, your engineers, and your few en-

lightened citizens, it is the shadow of death that really does the trick.

So, in this so-called "reasoning age" tragedy appears to be the whole road to enlightenment. Peace is the product of war, and health the product of the fear of death.

The information flashed with limelight distinctness by Dr. Hodgetts that the typhoid death rate of Canada is 35.5 as compared with 6.2 in Scotland and 11.2 in England, calls for a thinking halt.

In England and Scotland the people are not called upon to vote on the privilege or otherwise of poisoning streams with the germs of disease. A community is served with notice to comply with the law. Non-compliance means punishment and heavy fines. At the present time there is only one Province in Canada whose laws make "stream pollution prevention" obligatory, and that is the new Province of Saskatchewan. Here no community can raise debentures for the laying or extension of a public sewer until the law regarding the prevention of water pollution by sewage is complied with. This simply carries with it the necessity of installing a sewage purification system with a sewer system where required, otherwise the community cannot get the funds to build the sewer, which would lead to contamination.

What the Health Committee of the Conservation Commission will really do we cannot pretend to say. There is talk of river sanitary surveys, of a central bacteriological station, of increased administrative machinery, of a Federal council handing out advice to Provincial Boards. What will all this do? Probably publish blue books, which only a few will glance at, cause meetings and talks between men who have measured every square inch of the subject. And, greatest thought of all, educate the public, that illusory, never myself, never yourself, that irresponsible, non-get-at-able ideal quantity which constitutes the excuse of every enervated politician who would rather think than act.

All that we have mentioned as probable work of the committee is good in itself, but it must give birth to a practical, live enactment, commencing with the words, "Thou shalt not."

Last year we experienced zephyr-like vibrations, caused by the announcement of a Dominion Act in Senate to prevent the pollution of navigable waters and waters entering the same. We followed the discussions of that august body until we got befogged in the mysteries of the British North America Act, and acute reasoning as to whether all Canada or only the Provinces were responsible for stream poisoning and its prevention, and that the Federal Government's powers only applied to pollution by sawdust and not to sewage.

But, let us get back to the subject of this article, "Should the Question of Public Health be Subject to the Vote of the Public?" We certainly conclude with a negative answer. The public may choose whether they will ride in street cars or walk, whether they light their streets with gas or electricity, whether they pave them with wood or macadam, and in all such kindred subjects of public utility. But as to continuing any method which means communal suicide and the poisoning of the stranger within its gates, the public must be denied a voice and State intervention supervene.