

APPENDIX T.

FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS AND THE LAW FROM A MEDICAL VIEWPOINT.*

BY THOMAS W. SALMON, M.D.,

Medical Director, National Committee for Mental Hygiene, Member Advisory Board,
Children's Hospitals and Schools, Randall's Island, New York.

FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS AND THE LAW FROM THE MEDICAL VIEWPOINT.

A comparatively short time ago feeble-mindedness was of interest almost exclusively to psychiatrists, psychologists and teachers,—those who in their daily work are directly concerned with the study of human brains. Although the disastrous consequences of permitting the feeble-minded to participate in the affairs of life upon equal terms with others were recognized, often publicly voiced by those charged with their institutional care, it was possible to arouse but little general interest in the subject. There was no general appreciation of the fact that the problems of feeble-mindedness touch in some way every man and every woman and are to be met and solved not only in the institution and the clinic but in the school-room, the court, the prison and the home. Within a few years a remarkable transformation has occurred. To-day interest in feeble-mindedness and its consequences—to society and to the individual—has extended far beyond those whose professional work brings them into contact with the mentally defective. There will be little dissent at the present time from the statement recently made by Dr. E. E. Southard that the problem of the feeble-minded is the chief single practical problem before a state.

Evidence of this extraordinary popular interest in mental deficiency is everywhere to be found. Within three years, twelve official commissions have been appointed in as many states to study the problems which have grown out of our failure to provide for the feeble-minded. Half as many new beds in institutions for the feeble-minded have been provided in the United States since 1910 as in the sixty years preceding. The special classes for feeble-minded school children existing in nearly all the larger cities have created such a demand for teachers trained for this work that not less than a dozen universities and teachers' training schools are offering courses for those who are to labour in this field. In New York, five great departments of the city government asked the Board of Estimate this year to provide facilities for diagnosing mental deficiency. The medical examination of immigrants now actually centres upon the diagnosis of the feeble-minded, although only a few years ago this aspect was almost ignored. Such illustrations might be multiplied almost indefinitely. They serve to show how popular attention has turned toward feeble-mindedness and its problems.

It is not within the scope of this paper to consider the causes which have been responsible for this great extension of interest in feeble-mindedness. The discovery and popularization of certain psychological tests which vary greatly in disclosing feeble-mindedness have been a most important factor, but it seems likely that the chief cause has been the present tendency to break down the so-called anti-social

* Read at a meeting of the Society of Medical Jurisprudence, held November 13, 1916.