

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

TUBERCULOSIS—A SOCIAL DISEASE

EXTRACTS FROM AN ARTICLE BY DR. OCTAVE MONOD OF THE LEAGUE
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OF all the great scourges with which humanity is afflicted, there is none today more terrible than tuberculosis. This disease, already known to Hippocrates, had always been considered throughout the ages as a diathetic and constitutional affection, engendered in the organism by manifold and various causes. We must pass over the long darkness of the middle ages and come to quite modern times, before we find any change in this point of view. It was due to the genius of Villemin that the inoculability and contagiousness of tuberculosis were both asserted and proved. When, some years later, Koch discovered the bacillus which today bears his name, the last remaining doubts on this question were dispelled, and a new horizon, rich with promise, was disclosed.

No longer have we to contend with a hidden and mysterious foe; we know our enemy, we know where he is generated, the causes which favor or retard his development are perceptible to us. The first measures to be taken aim above all at the destruction of the microbe by disinfecting the sputum, clothes, and bedding of those afflicted with the disease, as well as by sterilizing milk and meat which may contain tubercular bacilli of animal origin.

Unfortunately, however sound these ideas may be in theory, their practical application presents great difficulties, for it soon became apparent that on account of the prevalence of tuberculosis, and its great diffusion, the isolation of the carriers of contagion is one of the most intricate of economic and social problems, and which so far it has been impossible to solve.

Since the work accomplished by Villemin and Koch, continuous research has gradually modified our conceptions and thrown a new light on the means of combating tuberculosis. For one thing, the long admitted and uncontested theory that the disease is hereditary has had to be abandoned. The child of tuberculous parents (except possibly in some very rare instances) is not born with the disease, but only contracts it afterwards. This is a comforting fact, inasmuch as it suffices to remove the new-born infant and surround it with proper care in order to save it from the disease which has attacked its parents. It has also been ascertained that tuberculosis is far more widespread than had at first been supposed.