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SECT

THE TREATMENT OF FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN.

By ALFRED EICHHOLZ, M.A., M.D.,
M.M. Inspector of Schools, London.

FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS, or mental deficiency, is a symptomatic condition to which a medical man art with hope of success, as a social and educational condition which has gradually arisen in connexion with ment of elementary education in this and o Since the general enforcement of educational l 1870—if not before—it had been perceived with certainty, that a considerable proportion of ch amenable to the ordinary school curriculum, a reason of poor attendance or the method. Children of this type remained at school with l of progress during the whole of school life. So way to the Poor-law institutions for imbecile others, still worse, remained in the streets and and aimless, a danger to society.

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Act except under medical certificate, which r a duly-qualified practitioner approved by the Board of Education, certify that not being imbecile and not being merely dull or backward, is, by reason of, (1) mental or (2) physical defect, incapable of receiving proper benefit from the instruction in an ordinary public elementary school, but is not incapable, by reason of such defect, of receiving benefit from instruction in a certified special class or school.

There is arising, therefore, in this connexion a practitioner with a new range of experience, for it is clear that in order to sign the certificate under the Act the school doctor must be to a certain extent educationally familiar with the methods and standards of the public elementary school, and that at the same time he must possess a considerable knowledge of the mental powers of the child under normal and abnormal conditions in order to determine with proximate accuracy the state of a child under examination. Further, he is called upon in the terms of the certificate to forecast the future by way of prognosis in ascertaining that the child is not incapable of receiving benefit from instruction in a certified special class or school. The larger School Boards throughout the country have, therefore, availed themselves of the services of competent medical men to advise them in the organization of these special schools. Combined with experience of a paedagogical nature a knowledge of the aspects of insanity is certainly useful, though the purview of the problem of the feeble-minded is rather different. The treatment of insanity is largely palliative, while with the feeble-minded it is ameliorative.

Your school doctor must therefore, above all, possess deep sympathy, and no other quality will avail him so much as the ability to reach down and place himself into a state of mind which will make him accessible to the child committed to him for investigation. Familiarity with ordinary school methods, a special knowledge of normal and abnormal states of the child's mind, and a certain accessibility of temperament will therefore constitute the special characteristics of the school doctor. It is his business to determine whether backwardness is due to causes other than feeble-mindedness. He must exclude deafness, blindness, negligence in school attendance—circumstances which may easily escape notice. He must furthermore exclude from the special school imbeciles on the one hand, and the mere dunces on the other. Nor does his

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THE TREATMENT OF FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN.

By ALFRED EICHHOLZ, M.A., M.D.,
M.M. Inspector of Schools, London.

FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS, or mental deficiency, is not so much a symptomatic condition to which a medical man can apply his art with hope of success, as a social and educational grouping which has gradually arisen in connexion with the development of elementary education in this and other countries. Since the general enforcement of educational laws in the year 1870—if not before—it had been perceived with ever-increasing certainty, that a considerable proportion of children were not amenable to the ordinary school curriculum, and this not by reason of poor attendance or the method of instruction. Children of this type remained at school with little or no sign of progress during the whole of school life. Some found their way to the Poor-law institutions for imbecile children, and others, still worse, remained in the streets and alleys, lawless and aimless, a danger to society.

As the result of an inquiry conducted by the Education Department, an Act was passed in 1898, enabling school authorities to make provision for these children out of the rates, and admission to the special schools so provided was conditioned by mental or physical defect, rendering the child incapable of receiving tuition in the ordinary public elementary schools, but not incapable of receiving benefit from instruction in such special schools or classes.

Excluded from the benefit of this Act were therefore, the unimprovable imbeciles on the one hand, and the lazy dullard or merely backward, on the other. Out of the operation of this Act, a definite type was gradually crystallizing, about which it was becoming possible, in the light of growing experience, to apply something more than mere negative attributes.

The importance of this aspect of abnormal child nature to the practitioner is very definite, for in the first place no child may be admitted to a school for the feeble-minded under the Act except under medical certificate, which runs as follows:

I, a duly-qualified practitioner approved by the Board of Education, certify that not being imbecile and not being merely dull or backward, is, by reason of, (1) mental or (2) physical defect, incapable of receiving proper benefit from the instruction in an ordinary public elementary school, but is not incapable, by reason of such defect, of receiving benefit from instruction in a certified special class or school.

There is arising, therefore, in this connexion a practitioner with a new range of experience, for it is clear that in order to sign the certificate under the Act the school doctor must be to a certain extent educationally familiar with the methods and standards of the public elementary school, and that at the same time he must possess a considerable knowledge of the mental powers of the child under normal and abnormal conditions in order to determine with proximate accuracy the state of a child under examination. Further, he is called upon in the terms of the certificate to forecast the future by way of prognosis in ascertaining that the child is not incapable of receiving benefit from instruction in a certified special class or school. The larger School Boards throughout the country have, therefore, availed themselves of the services of competent medical men to advise them in the organization of these special schools. Combined with experience of a paedagogical nature a knowledge of the aspects of insanity is certainly useful, though the purview of the problem of the feeble-minded is rather different. The treatment of insanity is largely palliative, while with the feeble-minded it is ameliorative.

Your school doctor must therefore, above all, possess deep sympathy, and no other quality will avail him so much as the ability to reach down and place himself into a state of mind which will make him accessible to the child committed to him for investigation. Familiarity with ordinary school methods, a special knowledge of normal and abnormal states of the child's mind, and a certain accessibility of temperament will therefore constitute the special characteristics of the school doctor. It is his business to determine whether backwardness is due to causes other than feeble-mindedness. He must exclude deafness, blindness, negligence in school attendance—circumstances which may easily escape notice. He must furthermore exclude from the special school imbeciles on the one hand, and the mere dunces on the other. Nor does his

duty end with the admission of the children. He is called upon to re-examine them periodically, and to report on their condition, and make new recommendations if need be; he will, in fact, never lose sight of the child so long as the school authority claims a hold over it.

The Board of Education asks, in the case of each child, for a family history. All acquainted with the difficulties of arriving at accurate statements of the family skeleton will understand the reason of the provision that no certificate will be called for until a child has been at school at least six months. The class teacher will by this time have culled sufficient knowledge of the child to be able, with the doctor's help, to furnish a tolerably accurate account of the state of the home, from a medical point of view, and it is only very rarely that mental deficiency is not found to be associated with some tangible physical defect. This in most instances takes the form of some infantile disease, some pronounced form of neglect or malnutrition, and includes rickets, phthisis, and other forms of tuberculosis, chorea, convulsions, epilepsy, meningitis, tabes mesenterica, hydrocephalus, adenoids, hemiplegia, traumatic causes, concussion, the sequelae of zymotic diseases.

Prenatal associations include drink, lunacy, sexual perversion, and also purely sociological condition favouring feeble-mindedness, such as neglect, and malnutrition.

The school authority is empowered to retain these children at school until the age of 16, with a view to securing the maximum improvement at the limit of school age, and the larger grant is a recognition by the Board of Education of the exceptional difficulty of the teaching and the increased expense thereby entailed. The classes contain from 15 to 25 children, instead of 60 to 70 as in an ordinary school; but even this number is frequently found to be excessive under circumstances of special difficulty. The authority may provide for its children either by a day school or by small institutions.

The day schools are separate organizations from the ordinary elementary schools, though for convenience built in their immediate precincts. They contain from one to four or six class rooms, each to contain about twenty children, so that a day school for 120 children is about the maximum. A good school provides a hall, teachers' room, provision for a midday meal, though the Imperial taxes may not be devoted to defray the actual cost of food. The midday meal is an important item in the organization of a day school which these enfeebled children attend, frequently from distances too great to admit a return home in the midday interval. In such cases the authority may pay for the journey to and from school. Some of the more expensively equipped day schools, as in Manchester and Liverpool, provide a doctor's room, in which a medical examination may be conducted without discomfort to the child.

The small institution is, up to the present, by far the rarer mode of meeting the needs of the feeble-minded, though undoubtedly the method to be preferred. The child is boarded and lodged, as well as taught, and is removed from the doubtful and often evil influences of the home environment.

The school authorities have provided exclusively day schools on account of the extra expense entailed in the establishment of institutions which may not consist of more

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