

## BRIEF REPORTS

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### STERILIZATION AND MARRIAGE OF LEPERS

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In 1933 we undertook in this colony an experiment as regards the marriage of lepers under controlled conditions. This deals with a matter that is so urgent that I should like to report our experience for discussion.

First of the reasons for this experiment is that attempts to do away with marriage lead to difficulties in an institution like a leper colony. Marriage is the natural state; man needs a mate, a home and a child, and to permit such relationships in a leper colony is but the humane thing to do provided it can be done without its resulting in the birth of children. In some institutions marriage is permitted without interference as regards procreation, and in others inmates are permitted to pair off and live as man and wife illegitimately. In either case children are born, with the result that in trying to solve one problem another is created.

Where, as in most leprosy asylums—as in ours heretofore—the sexes are separated in dormitories there is bound to be a great deal of immorality, and perverted practices are common. It has been our experience that many inmates have left the colony solely to take up with a mate. Since no official marriage ceremony is performed these couples live together so long as all goes well between them, or until one of the parties becomes a burden to the other, but they are prone to separate on slight provocation. And in the meantime illegitimate children are born to a fate that is anything but happy.

Again, there is a problem in the patient in whom the disease is arrested and who is discharged from the institution. These people

are not accepted back into their own society; they are feared, shunned and buffeted about, and are a burden to themselves and the community. As an example, one of our discharged patients who recently returned to us said that the villagers would not allow him to drink from the village well or to walk in the path, and his family told him that his presence would prevent his sister and brother from ever getting married, as a leper in the family stigmatizes it. So for him there remained only suicide, or to beg, or to return to us.

Many of these people under such circumstances wander aimlessly as beggars about the country, or join leper camps. There are many of these camps in Korea where couples live together, begging for an existence, and bringing children into the world. There is a group of 75 couples a mile from our colony, two large groups (about 600 people) near the Fusan Colony, a large one near that at Taiku, and many small ones all over the southern section of Korea. In the camp near our colony there are 22 children, and in another of 8 couples there are 7 children. There can be no home life under the conditions in which these people live, and the future of the children is hopeless. In our experience about half the children of lepers become infected when they remain with their parents. Even if the children in question escape the disease they cannot become upright, useful citizens under such circumstances, for the members of the camps all tend to become hardened characters. If they cannot obtain a living by begging, they steal.

These leper camps constitute a great problem for the communities in which they are. The police try to break them up, increasing the hardship of those affected. No one cares, and no one helps to provide anything better. The problem would be solved in many cases by marriage of the couples and a little assistance to secure land to cultivate and houses to live in. At relatively small expense it would be possible to start a colony or community for such people that would be self-supporting. This being impossible to us at present, an effort has been made to meet on a small scale the problem within our own institution.

The procedure was to select a number of couples who were eligible for marriage, allot them land for gardens, aid them in building homes, sterilize the males, and arrange that each couple adopt a child to care for. The couples were to be as nearly self-supporting as possible, but we agreed to provide each person the equivalent of fifty cents gold per month. The adoption of a child, designed to make the home complete, is the essential part of the scheme, for

in Korea the desire for a son is almost a religion. An adopted child answers every purpose, and it is really an unwritten law that if one brother has no son he may adopt one of his brother's sons.

Eleven selected men were offered the opportunity to marry provided they would accept the conditions laid down, and ten of them accepted the proposal. The men selected were arrested cases, more or less scarred by the disease, and were persons such as carpenters, masons, the head plowman, the recorder—diligent, faithful and trustworthy men who could support themselves and would be of permanent value to the colony. Each man was allotted a piece of ground and, the first necessity being a house, each was given fifteen yen (about five dollars gold) and the sheet metal for his roof. In due course there were built ten model cottages, in the ordinary Korean style but of more permanent nature, each consisting of two rooms, a kitchen and a porch.

The selection of the brides-to-be was done according to local custom, through a middleman, the negotiations going on during the months of preparation. They were, of course, chosen from among inmates of the colony who were eligible for marriage under the laws of both Church and State, a requirement which made for difficulty in some cases. It was interesting to note that the men did not make their choice from among the young girls but from the older women, the reason given being that they know how to work and have had home experience. The children to be adopted were also chosen from among the arrested cases in the colony.

Finally, each man was vasectomized, a simple operation done in ten minutes or so under local anesthesia, after which they were kept in the hospital for three days and to their quarters for another week. No operation was performed on the women, this being considered unnecessary, though they were willing to undergo it and most of the men felt that the women should be sterilized rather than themselves.

The multiple wedding took place in the spring of 1933, in our open amphitheatre, with many guests present. An amusing feature was that the adopted children served as flower girls and attendants to their new parents.

At the time of writing, more than a year after the wedding, this experiment seems to be working out most successfully. The couples have made real homes for themselves in their neat little cottages, and it would be difficult to find more attractive ones in all Korea. The people are happy and busy, tending their gardens and working about their houses, which are the cleanest in the colony. They are happy in the assurance that should one of them become sick or blind or crippled, as often happens in this disease, there will be the mate to care for him; thus is removed the dread that so many feel of those last days when they most need care and are most shunned. Especially gratifying is their attitude toward their adopted children. They care for them as if they were their own, and give them a proper home training which they could not have in

the dormitories. Each child is taught to work and is assigned tasks and duties, such as gathering fuel for the home, all quite as are normal children in the villages.

These marriages have had a good effect on the other inmates. In the first place, the couples themselves are exceedingly careful not to break rules or do anything that might lead to their dismissal from the institution, and the others are trying so to live that they themselves may be allowed to marry. As for the important consideration of expense, the produce of their farming has reduced the per capita cost of the maintenance of these couples to one-fourth of that of the average. One fails to see any good reason why this method of dealing with lepers in an institution such as ours should not be allowed, and we are selecting the next ten couples to be given the same privilege, though we are limited in the extent to which we can do this by lack of land.

#### SUMMARY

Certain selected inmates of our leper colony in whom the disease has been arrested have been allowed to choose mates. After they had built, with some assistance, houses for themselves on plots of land assigned to them, and after the males had been sterilized, they were married. Each couple was required to select from among the children of the colony one to adopt and bring up as their own. Those who entered this relationship did so voluntarily, and the experiment so far has been eminently successful. It has had a good effect upon all of the inmates of the colony, and has reduced to one fourth the per capita cost of maintaining those concerned.

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