

CORRESPONDENCE

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OBSERVATIONS IN THE WEST INDIES

To the EDITOR:

I have recently returned from a visit to the British West Indies, and think it may be of interest to record a few observations on what I saw there. My four outstanding impressions with regard to leprosy were as follows:

(1) There does not seem to be any correspondence between the severity of the disease and its disappearance from a territory. In those islands where leprosy is obviously disappearing, such as Jamaica and Barbados, and especially the latter, the types of cases are just as serious as those that I saw anywhere else.

(2) A striking fact that seems to be consistent throughout the region is that the variety of leprosy depends on racial characteristics rather than on climatic or any other local factor. For instance, leprosy of the scalp seems to occur in Africans and the Mongolian races, possibly also the Europeans, but as far as I know not in Indians. The Indian appears to acquire the Indian type and the Chinese the Chinese type, although these races have remained in the West Indies for a number of generations, emphasizing again that climate seems to have very little to do with the progress of the disease.

This question of racial resistance, I think, ought to be taken up seriously by those who are in a position to study the differences in leprosy among the various races. Why should the Indian in British West Indies acquire the Indian variety, and the African show a form of the disease that is relatively much more serious? Is there any essential biochemical or physiological factor in the make-up of races? Or is there an inherited resistance which explains it? The latter would be suggesting Molesworth's hypothesis, which already has been discussed pretty fully. This phenomenon, however, was so striking that it would be well to endeavor to elucidate it.

(3) I am more convinced than ever that the crux of the leprosy problem lies in the incidence amongst children, and that the variety of leprosy in the adult gives very little or no information as to the progress of the disease in the community. For instance, in Barbados, where the disease is dying out, there is not a great deal of evidence of childhood infection, although I admit that further surveys in the one or two foci which remain may reveal such infections. In Grenada, where the disease has never gained a hold, there was no childhood infection at all, although there were quite a number of advanced nodular cases of the worst variety.

(4) One of the principal epidemiological factors with regard to leprosy, apart from the question of age, is the economic one. By the economic factor I mean anything which affects the population in such a way as to make them more susceptible to epidemic or endemic diseases. In those islands of the West Indies where the economic conditions are good, and where the soil is good, there is no indigenous leprosy of any moment. On the other hand in islands such as St. Kitts, Dominica and Antigua, especially the former two, where economic conditions are poor and the dietetic factor below the standard necessary for complete fitness, leprosy is comparatively rife. This was emphasized again in infection among children. Dr. O. F. H. Atkey's recent article in the *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL* shows that the milk-drinking peoples in the Sudan have very little leprosy. This is confirmed by what I found in the West Indian Islands, namely, that those whose dietetic and economic conditions were good had very little leprosy.

I hope to give you at a later date further information regarding the situation in the West Indies, and regarding my tour in general. However, I would like to put on record the extraordinary value to me personally of my visit to the Federal leprosarium at Carville, Louisiana. I do not know of another institution where so much good work is being done, under conditions which are almost ideal, and I would urge any leprosy worker who may be visiting the United States to pay a visit to Carville. Many things that are possible there are not possible elsewhere, but nevertheless, anyone who visits the institution will find it most profitable both from the administrative and from the medical points of view.

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