

MARRIAGE AMONG LEPERS

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Recently I made a report of our experiment upon sterilization and marriage of lepers⁽¹⁾. I wish now to make a further report upon the twenty-two adults and the eleven adopted children concerned in this experiment, with reference to their progress and condition to date, and also to report upon a similar but unsterilized group whom we did not select for marriage and in the arrangement of whose marriages we had no part.

Three years after their marriage our eleven families have remained well, industrious and happy, and there has been no relapse of the disease in any case. On the land provided for them they have produced their living, and most of the men have also had some regular assignment to duties in the colony. The children are being raised and trained under the usual conditions of village life. Each child does his part for the support of the home and family, such as gathering fuel and doing farm and garden work. Though they are only adopted children, their foster-parents seem to give them as much care and affection as they would their own children. The results of this experiment have been very pleasing.

The second group consists of seventeen couples who married without any intervention or control on our part. When we moved our colony from the former site at Kwangju, seventeen of the male patients resigned from the colony and took up their abode upon the old land, where they established farms. These men happened to be strong, active and industrious, and the disease was apparently arrested in all of them. After a few months it was noticed that a number of the girls were also resigning. Later it was discovered that each of the men, on his own responsibility, had taken a wife from among the girls. The girls were apparently well and in good condition, but they had not been proved bacteriologically negative.

Some time later the Government suddenly decided that all lepers should be removed from the old site, and arrangements were made for us to take them in until a place could be provided for them in

the Government colony. After they had been with us for a year another arrangement was effected, whereby we should keep these seventeen couples while the Government would take care of an equal number from a leper village near us. We were willing to cooperate in this way in the effort to clean up this village, which was proving to be an annoyance to all. Some friends who were on a visit offered to erect cottages for this group, providing 80 yen per cottage.

About a year after these people were married a number of babies were born, nine in all. Each of the men concerned was promptly vasectomized, and no further births have occurred. Meanwhile two serious problems have arisen. First, four of the mothers have had a relapse of the disease due to the strain of pregnancy and lactation. In one woman the condition became so bad that she has had to enter the hospital and will never again be able to take care of her home. The second problem is that of the nine children. We have tried in every way to get them into some orphanage, but this seems impossible. Orphanages are few in this country, and they will not knowingly receive children of lepers. We may be forced to start an orphanage ourselves in order to care for them.

With proper food and care, and with isolation from leprous relatives, these children could be saved from leprosy. In a country like Japan, where it is planned to eradicate the disease in the next thirty years, contact with leper relatives is one source of infection that might be prevented. From the Philippines it is reported that a hundred babies are born annually to lepers. They constitute a problem that might confront any country—lepers in the making. It seems the rule that about 50 percent of the children of lepers contract the disease.

There is a high frequency of involvement of the testicles in leprosy, which means that sterility in the male is common; this condition occurs in some 50 percent of cases. In our seventeen families nine had babies, 52 percent. There seems to be no leprous involvement of the ovaries, and sterility is not common among the women.

The lepers themselves in this country are realizing the serious problems of marriage and the resulting pregnancies, and the men are constantly turning to us for vasectomy. Many of the women who are arrested cases leave us, marry and set up homes, but a pregnancy may bring on a relapse and a baby may prove to be a big problem to its family. If some provision is not made to prevent conception by vasectomy, many who marry will produce offspring who in turn

will become lepers. Everything possible should be done to prevent the production of leper children.

In Japan the policy appears to be to isolate all lepers and to keep them isolated, whether they have been cured or not. Under these circumstances it seems that the best policy would be to provide agricultural colonies for arrested and cured persons that would allow them to marry and become self-supporting. Our system of vasectomy of the men is a voluntary one, and the operation is done strictly on condition that the man is willing and able to work and support a wife and an adopted child. A thing we have taken into consideration is that the patients are often too scarred to get back into society, yet are able to work.

SUMMARY

X One group of eleven carefully selected, strong and able-bodied couples in whom the disease was arrested were allowed to marry after vasectomy of the male, and to adopt a child and support themselves upon land within our colony. There have been no relapses of the disease after three years, and the experiment has proved a happy one.

A second group with whose selection and marriage we had nothing to do came under our care. Among seventeen couples nine have had babies, and in four of the women concerned the disease has relapsed due to the strain of pregnancy and lactation.

Lepers will marry, as do other people. Relapses follow and children are born who create new problems. For a limited number of selected suitable cases it seems to be highly desirable to permit marriage after sterilization and to aid these families in becoming self-supporting. X

REFERENCE

- (1) WILSON, R. M. Sterilization and marriage of lepers. *Internat. Jour. Lep.* 3 (1935) 201-206.