

TUBERCULOSIS AND LEPROSY

TO THE EDITOR:

The following comments on tuberculosis and leprosy in South America, which were made in a discussion of an article by Dr. Charles Wilcock on "Tuberculosis in the natives of tropical and subtropical regions" [*Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 32 (1939) 669-696], are offered for the consideration of workers in leprosy.

In an article published in 1912 the writer stated that in one South American country leprosy was spreading more rapidly and with greater intensity of contagiousness than was tuberculosis, the type of leprosy being a very virulent one. In 1919 Professor Marchoux quoted this statement, saying: "The number of lepers increases rapidly in that country and is spreading more rapidly than tuberculosis." The same statement was repeated at the Strasbourg conference in 1923, and in the same year at a Latin-American meeting of the League of Nations.

The fact was that leprosy was spreading in a very virulent form, while tuberculosis was at that time practically a negligible and unnoticeable disease. Today, however, after twenty-six years, things are different. There are four times more lepers in that country than there were in 1912, but the incidence of tuberculosis, which was practically unknown then, now far outstrips that of leprosy.

The same thing is seen all over the continent of South America; the tropical countries of that continent that have had, and have, the highest incidence of leprosy have now also the highest incidence of tuberculosis. In connection with the rela-

tion of tuberculosis and leprosy to one another in the tropics the following facts are worth mentioning, as they seem to indicate that the two diseases find under tropical conditions some very congenial mutual affinity for each other: (1) The recent known invasion of leper countries by tuberculosis. (2) The superimposition of tuberculosis upon leprosy. (3) The high mortality from tuberculosis among lepers in some tropical countries, being as high as 28 percent.

Leprosy is perhaps the slowest of all chronic diseases, in both its inception and its course. Tuberculosis is much more rapid in every respect, and the mortality from tuberculosis is two hundred times higher than from leprosy. What will happen in tuberculosis-infected leper countries? Will leprosy so favor the propagation of tuberculosis, by providing the most suitable soil for it, that the latter will increase with greater rapidity than it might otherwise have done? Will tuberculosis kill out leprosy by killing off the lepers more rapidly than they would have died otherwise? It looks as if tuberculosis might win in a race against time.

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