

Fear As Medicine

Medicine

A medical progress note prepared by the American Association for Medical Progress.

It may be true that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Unfortunately, most of us are unable to distinguish between fear of the Lord and fear of the Devil. In our struggles to make other people or children conform to our notions of propriety we are tempted to rely upon fear. "It stands to reason" that people will avoid conduct that involves disagreeable penalties, or that they will do what they must to avoid penalties. It may be, however, that we appeal to fear only for lack of better technique.

From the point of view of promoting health, it seems especially deplorable that parents, teachers and health officers continue to resort to fear, when other means are available, since the inculcation of fear is in itself an assault upon the health of human beings. Those who have had the greatest experience in the organized effort to combat the venereal diseases long ago abandoned the gallery

of horrors as an educational instrument. During the short experience that our health workers had with the American army in the World War it was discovered that the effectiveness of fear in preventing venereal diseases was just about counterbalanced by its effectiveness in developing neuroses. A knowledge of bacteria may be helpful for avoiding infections; but we need not have the kind of knowledge that culminates in bacteriophobias.

The propaganda against the extension of public health measures occasionally attacks health officers for working up a smallpox "scare" for the purpose of promoting vaccination. If serious smallpox does not follow the official warning many people resent having been stampeded into vaccination, which they consider unnecessary except in the presence of a serious danger. On the other hand, the opponents of vaccination frequently alarm people with stories of sore arms, lingering illness, perhaps ampu-

tations, and even death, "following vaccination". Of course, in addition to promoting neuroses, these stories are effective for the immediate purpose of obstructing vaccination. In any case the public is confused by the appeal to fear; and in the long run a confused public cannot be relied upon to act intelligently in a difficult situation.

That other means of attaining the desired end are available every mature person can see for himself in such facts as these: Accidents in industry have been radically reduced in recent years, not by making workers more fearful, not even by making them consciously more cautious, but by developing routine equipment and practices that reduce accidents to a minimum. Civilized human beings go on about their affairs years at a stretch without infections, without blunders, and yet without trepidation. We can establish standard practice that takes advantage of our knowledge and that lays aside hampering and confusing fears.

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