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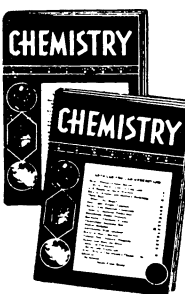
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PUBLIC HEALTH

U.S. Immunization Is Lax

Every possible step should be taken to prevent the spreading of communicable diseases. Millions on research are spent in vain if people are not immunized through vaccination.

By Jacobo Brailovsky, M. D.

Dr. Jacobo Brailovsky, medical editor of La Nacion, Buenos Aires, Argentina, is guest writer for Science Service on a fellowship of the Organization of American States, Pan American Union.

➤ IN 1914, during World War I, more native soldiers in the French Army died because of a real tuberculosis epidemic than because of direct military causes on the battlefield. The contact between these men, who had no immunization against the scourge, and the troops coming from large cities, produced such a high mortality rate that it seriously worried the commanders of the Allied Forces.

The Army Medical Corps had to take every precaution and their doctors had to proceed with the immunization of all of the soldiers coming from Senegal.

As well as in the case of tuberculosis there have been far-reaching health campaigns against epidemic diseases such as cholera, smallpox, typhoid fever, polio, to mention the ones that are better known.

What has been and still is the primary purpose of all of these medical efforts? The primary purpose has been to achieve the best health for the individual human being and for the people. Its attainment has been one of the fundamental objectives of science, and to that end all of the countries of the world spend fabulous amounts of money for scientific research. Microbes and viruses are, then, the greatest enemies of mankind. To destroy them, to eliminate them from the body, or to increase physical resistance to their tenacious and aggressive action, in broad terms, represent the various phases of this uneven struggle.

Root of the Problem

My visit to the United States has permitted me once more to observe at first hand some of the essential characteristics of the problem. There is no doubt that in this country, more than in any other I have visited, there is a veritable bee-hive of technicians, biologists and researchers waging a ruthless warfare against viruses and bacteria. Millions of dollars are spent each year for scientific programs to clarify the origins of communicable diseases, to determine the carrier through which they are disseminated and, in reality, to find out thoroughly how to immunize the human being against the deadly aggression of these invisible beasts.

I would not be true to myself, as a doctor of many years' standing and a newspaperman of even more, if I did not express my thoughts concerning the ultimate application of health programs, especially in this great country, where there is a deep-

rooted love for the maximum expression of individual freedom and an absolute respect for all of its institutions. But I would also like to point out that the concept of individual freedom necessarily comes to an end when this freedom implies serious danger for a man's fellow citizens.

A person who is an unconscious carrier of a communicable disease is as dangerous to his neighbors as the man who has become unbalanced and goes out in the streets, shooting at peaceful passers-by.

Can this incongruous and medieval situation be accepted in the name of individual freedom?

Compulsory Vaccination

All of the aforesaid points to the need of laws being passed, either by the individual states or by the Congress itself, to make large-scale vaccination compulsory, especially for diseases that are clearly recognizable.

It is true that persuasion and health education have done a great deal in this direction, but it is necessary to state sincerely and dispassionately that the danger of diseases persists as long as a single inhabitant of the country is a possible carrier of a communicable disease. All those millions will have been spent in vain. Scientists will continue to receive their rewards, and their prestige will continue to increase in this ambitious warfare against diseases, but mankind will still not be protected against the aggressive impact of numerous diseases, because of lack of apprehension about them, ignorance, negligence, or spirit of opposition of those who shrug their shoulders, as if it were a problem affecting only the man in question, and not the entire community.

I realize that compulsory laws will seem to many a denial of freedom. But it is not freedom that is at stake, but the safety of the entire population. This is the way the authorities have looked at it in many cases when they have passed laws for the benefit of the people. Do not the red and green traffic lights represent a curtailment of the freedom of the individual?

I have discussed this matter with eminent scientists and all are in agreement as to the necessity of taking every possible health measure and of preventing communicable diseases. But who is going to bell the cat?

Educate the people, persuade them through insistent arguments, to carry out a medical survey on epidemiological incidence, that is, to create a true health awareness. Point out every person as a possible carrier of a disease, be it unimportant or serious, to his countrymen or his loved ones, and then pass the law.

• Science News Letter, 80:246 October 7, 1961