

PUBLIC HEALTH

Good Health for 1941

Barring Increase in Accidents, or Spread of Epidemics Excellent Records of Recent Years Should Continue

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LAST December in my review of the mortality for 1939 I indicated that I anticipated no retrogression in the health of the public during 1940. Now, at the end of the year, it is gratifying to find that my statement has been essentially confirmed. While official statistics are not available for the total population, the experience of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company with its millions of industrial policyholders can be used as a safe index of the general situation. For experience has shown that these insured men, women and children, living in all parts of the United States and Canada, form a very fair cross-section of the general public.

The record for the first eleven and a half months of 1940 shows that their mortality rate for the year will be slightly lower than for last year. Under such conditions the health of the general population of the United States cannot be very different.

The year 1940 got off to a very good start. In the first six months the figures were, month for month, either the lowest

or next to the lowest on record. Beginning with the summer, however, when the excessive heat wave contributed to higher-than-average mortality, the death rates for several months ran somewhat above the figures for the past two years. But the month of November again showed the lowest mortality on record. Present indications are that December will also make an excellent showing, in spite of an extensive outbreak of influenza on the Pacific Coast and sporadic instances elsewhere. Fortunately, the type of influenza does not seem particularly virulent and, so far, has not resulted in any appreciable rise in deaths from pneumonia.

One of the most noteworthy features of the year's record is the marked decline in deaths from pneumonia. Each year since the extensive use of type-specific antisera and the introduction of sulfanilamide and allied improved derivatives in the treatment of pneumonia, there has been a sharp drop in its mortality. Since these declines have occurred even in the periods when influenza was prevalent, we may expect that at last a method of control has been found for pneumonia, and look forward with confidence to the time when this disease will record only the negligible

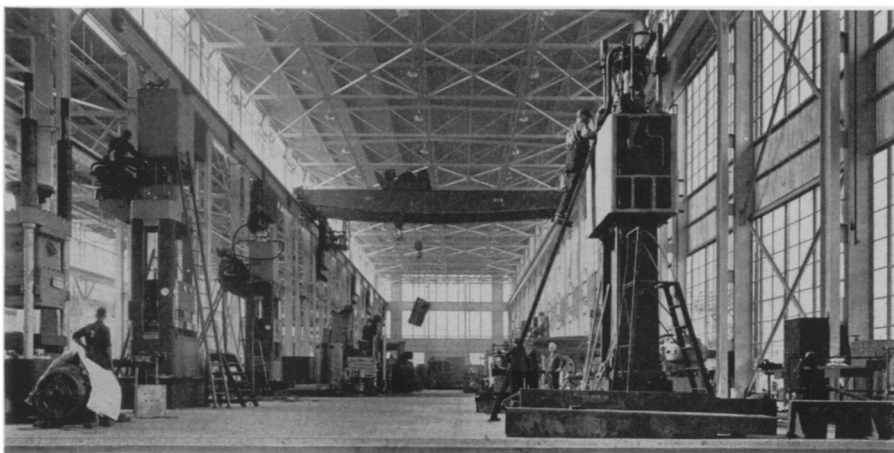
rates now in evidence for many of the other acute diseases.

The communicable diseases of childhood will register new low rates again this year, with three of them, namely measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria, causing a death rate of less than one per 100,000. Even whooping cough will show a rate but little above this figure. Another children's disease even more important numerically is diarrhea and enteritis, which will also register a new low for 1940. When we realize that according to the mortality prevailing at the beginning of this century, one-third of all persons born would eventually die from some acute condition, and that under present circumstances this ratio has been reduced to one-sixth, we can appreciate the beneficial effects resulting from the progress in the control of diphtheria, pneumonia, diarrhea and enteritis, and similar diseases.

It also appears that 1940 may be added to the long series of years which have witnessed continuous declines in the mortality from tuberculosis. There has been a considerable slackening in the rate of the fall, however. For many years past, the annual decreases have been sizable, but so far in 1940, the drop has been negligible, namely from 44.8 per 100,000 for the January-November period of 1939, to 44.3 for the like part of 1940.

A very favorable feature of this year's report is the further decline in the mortality of mothers during pregnancy and childbirth. The puerperal death rate for insured women is down 11.1 percent for the first eleven months of the year. The 1940 rate will be the lowest ever recorded.

Now, having considered the favorable side of this year's mortality situation, to make the picture complete we must also note that there are certain diseases and conditions which we have so far failed to bring under control. These are mainly the chronic conditions characteristic of middle and later life, including diseases of the heart, kidneys, and arteries, and cancer, and diabetes. To a large degree, upward trends in mortality from these diseases are inevitable, simply because of the steadily increasing proportion of older persons in our population. Our resources in preventing or postponing the onset of these diseases and in curing them are quite limited. Despite this, it would be wrong to say that little is being accomplished.



ON PRODUCTION LINE

Seventy-foot sub-chasers and motor torpedo boats are among the craft going through a production line designed and built by the Austin Co. in 75 days to speed defense. The photograph was made at the Elco Naval Works in Bayonne, N. J.