

Your Chances of Being Stricken By a Mental Disease

Psychiatry

IF you are going to be sick, the chances are nearly as great that you will have some mental ill as they are of your having some other ailment. Speaking under the auspices of Science Service in a radio talk through a nation-wide network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Dr. William A. White, superintendent of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington, D. C., and nationally-known psychiatrist, pointed out that mental disease is not nearly so rare as once was thought.

After explaining how the present century has given birth to the mental hygiene movement, and new facts are continually being learned about the treatment of insanity and lesser mental troubles, Dr. White said:

Need Not Be Insane

"Many of you who are listening to me will undoubtedly say to yourselves, 'This is all very interesting but what application has it to me? I am not insane, I do not expect to become insane, there is no insanity in my family, my friends and acquaintances are all self-sustaining, mentally well individuals so far as I know. This whole matter is one only for the exceptional individual, who will be adequately cared for by the means that are provided by the state and a few private hospitals.' If this is your conception of the significance of the problem of mental illness, may I say to you at once that you are quite wrong.

"Today the number of beds in hospitals for mental disease throughout the United States is very nearly as great as the number of beds in all other types of hospitals combined; and a recent report shows that of the beds under construction there are actually more beds being built right now for mental diseases in the United States than for all other diseases put together. In other words, you are certainly occasionally sick, almost every one of you, and these figures would indicate that you have on the whole pretty nearly as much of a chance of being mentally sick as you have of being sick in any other way.

"Fortunately, this statement is not quite true, because while there are as

many beds in mental hospitals as there are in all the others, the number of patients that pass through these beds is much less because the patients stay on an average very much longer in the mental hospitals than they do in the general hospitals. Nevertheless, when I tell you that the statistics recently compiled of New York State, which I may remind you contains approximately ten per cent. of the population of the United States, show that of the residents of that state one person in every twenty-two over the age of fifteen spends a certain portion of his time in a hospital for mental disease during the course of a generation, you will begin to see the significance of mental disease and to realize that after all you individually may not be as immune as you have been wont to think.

No One Is Immune

"Therefore mental illness is not rare, is not exceptional, it is not something which may not affect you individually or those whom you may love. No one is immune; and I have no doubt that many of your friends and many of the families the members of which you know could tell you of cases of mental illness which they know about or which are actually present in their own families, if they would. Let me add to this somewhat startling picture the fact that the number of patients in public institutions for mentally ill has increased something like three hundred per cent. in the last century.

"This does not mean necessarily that mental disease itself has increased at any such rate. It is partly an expression of the increasing confidence of the public in the mental hospital. But it is nevertheless a somewhat alarming state of affairs, especially when I tell you that according to the statisticians we are due to keep this rapid rate of increase for the next half century at about the same pace that it has been occurring during the past fifty years."

Dr. White described some of the ways in which mental hygiene is benefiting mankind.

"Man is applying his ingenuity," he said, "in attempting to discover

answers to the questions that have puzzled him for generations: why do people become mentally ill? Why do they become criminals? What is the meaning of unhappiness and discontent. How can habits that are destructive be modified. How can the energies that are being poured into useless activities be recaptured for the common good?

"As difficult as some of these questions may seem, as unanswerable as they may appear, it is nevertheless true that we are moving in the direction of better and better solutions; that progress is being made, slowly perhaps but, after the manner of science, with certainty; that the domain of false ideas and traditions, of superstitions and taboos, of nameless fears, of destructive tendencies—that the domain of these hobgoblins of the mind is being gradually invaded, that they are being studied with the purpose of their modifications and ultimate conquest."

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All About Weights

A WEIGHTS and measures library of about 1,200 volumes and 700 pamphlets and containing works from 1520 to the present time has been given Columbia University by Samuel S. Dale, of Boston, former editor of the "Textile World Record" and an authority on weights and measures.

Nineteen languages are found in the collection, which is the result of Mr. Dale's interest in the controversy over the proposed adoption of the metric system in the United States. It represents the accumulation of thirty years research in this country and abroad to bring together, the donor announced, "as far as possible a copy of every book, pamphlet, government document, and other printed or written matter dealing with the origin, history, development and science of weights and measures that has ever been issued in any language at any time."

Standard

Science News-Letter, September 6, 1930

Some of the mountains over which the famous Chinese wall was built ranged as high as 5,000 feet.