

PUBLIC HEALTH

Health Gains of 1939 Will Be Carried Onward in 1940

War Brings Danger of World Wide Epidemics, But If Spared Such Ills, We Should Have Healthful Year

By DR. LOUIS I. DUBLIN

Third Vice-President and Statistician, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company

FOR SOME years, it has been my custom at this time to attempt a forecast of the health conditions likely to prevail during the coming year. My prediction for 1939 was unusually optimistic; and so it is especially gratifying to observe how closely conditions have followed the course I anticipated. It can now be said with safety that 1939 will go down as one of the most healthful years in our history. In fact, it may even excel the banner year 1938 by a small margin.

My evidence for this statement is primarily the experience of the many millions of Industrial policyholders of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. These men, women and children, scattered as they are through every part of the United States and Canada, form a very fair cross-section of the general population of these countries and their experience is a very sensitive index of the general health conditions in this part of the world.

In my prediction last year, I pointed out the possibility of an outbreak of influenza. This actually occurred early in 1939. The epidemic swept the Southern and Central States, reaching its peak in March. Fortunately, the type of the disease was fairly mild, and it therefore failed to cause as many deaths as might have been expected in view of the large number of cases reported.

Nevertheless, the effect of this epidemic on the general mortality of the people was noteworthy. Deaths from heart disease, from diabetes, from cerebral hemorrhage and from cancer increased perceptibly over the year before.

This is a phenomenon which has been observed many times before. Older people suffering from these conditions are much more prone to die as the result of an attack of influenza. By the end of May, the death rate among these policyholders was three and one-half per cent higher than for the year before.

Beginning in June, however, and continuing in each of the succeeding months, the mortality declined to new lows, so that at the end of November the early excess of this year's death rate had been entirely erased.

In fact, with no untoward indication on the horizon we can now safely say that 1939 will register the best mortality in the history of this large group of insured people. And there is a fair chance that the same will be found true for the people of the United States and Canada when the official records become available.

One of the most gratifying features of the 1939 health picture is the low death rate from pneumonia. Present figures indicate that the current year will register the very lowest mortality from this disease ever experienced in this country. Undoubtedly, a good part of this achievement can be attributed to the new treatment for pneumococcal pneumonia with sulfapyridine and type-specific antiserums. The widespread adoption of this treatment with the splendid results universally reported, promises to relegate within a few years this hitherto dreaded scourge to a minor posi-

tion among the important causes of death.

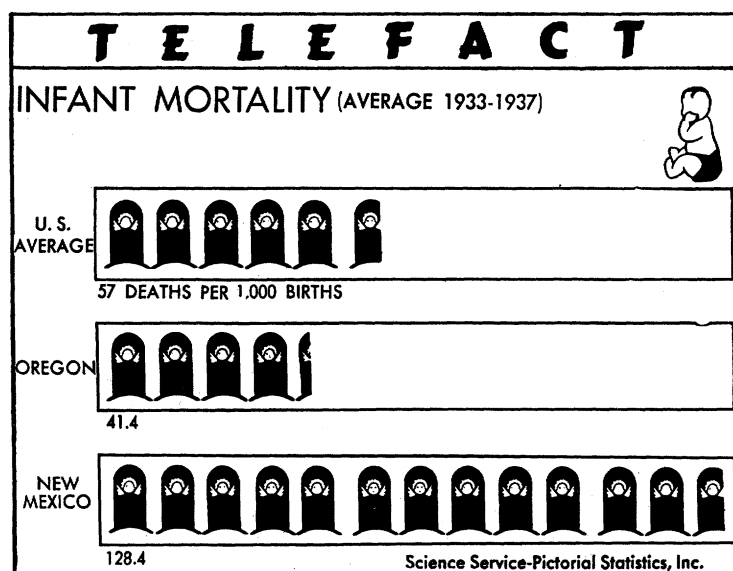
Tuberculosis is another disease that is rapidly being wiped out in this country. Indeed, if it were not for the large colored population which is still peculiarly susceptible to the disease, the United States would have one of the lowest, if not the very lowest, death rate from tuberculosis in the world.

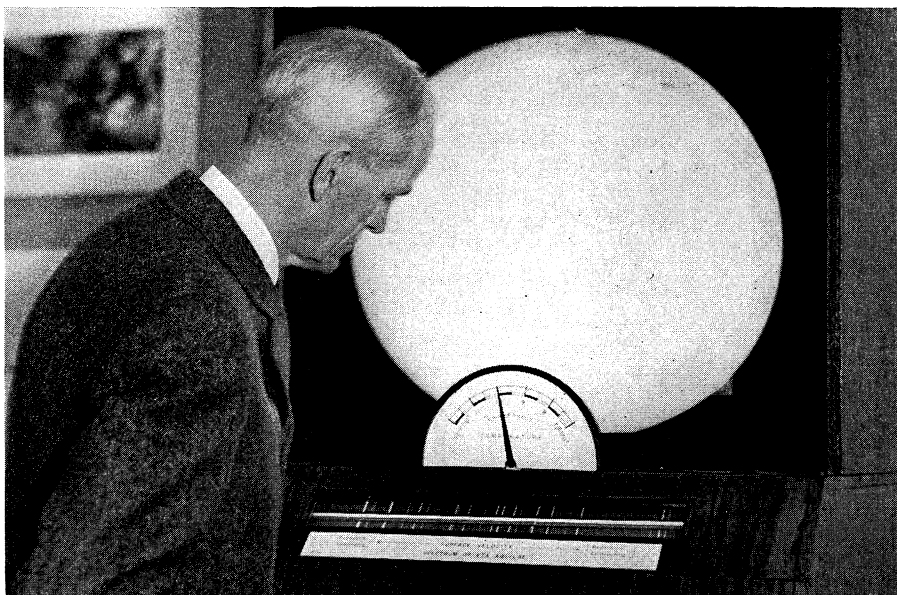
Among the Metropolitan Industrial policyholders it is very likely that this year's mortality rate from the white plague will reach the all-time low record of 45.0 per 100,000. This would indicate a final rate for the general population somewhere around 46 or 47, since the general death rate from tuberculosis in recent years has run one or two points above that of the Metropolitan policyholders.

Nineteen thirty-nine witnessed a further decline in the deaths of mothers from puerperal causes, the tenth consecutive year in which gains have been made against this form of preventable human sacrifice. Surely all will agree that herein is special cause for rejoicing. At a time when fewer and fewer women are willing to undergo the hazards of bringing babies into the world, we can ill afford to sacrifice a single one courageous enough to assume this responsibility.

The present year has been very kind to babies and young children. Those conditions and diseases chiefly responsible for the high mortality among infants, as well as the various communicable diseases of childhood, were all less prevalent than usual with the exception of infantile paralysis.

Smallpox showed a substantial de-





BALLOON SHOWS BEHAVIOR OF STAR

Dr. W. S. Adams, director of the Mt. Wilson Observatory is here shown with one of the exhibits of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. The expanding balloon represents a Cepheid variable type of star as it pulsates. The balloon changes colors to correspond with changes in stellar temperature.

crease over the last two years, although it is likely that at least 9,500 cases of this loathsome disease will have been recorded in this country before 1939 has ended. As usual, the States chiefly responsible for this disgraceful record are those in the North Central and Western sections of the country where compulsory vaccination is not generally accepted as a preventive of the disease.

I wish it were possible to report similarly gratifying progress in the control of those chronic affections resulting from the degenerative processes associated with advancing age. Reports for the current year afford no indication that we have made any progress toward checking the mortality from these conditions. In fact, such diseases as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and cerebral hemorrhage were all responsible for still higher death tolls than they exacted during the previous year. However, little success could have been expected in this direction since we have really not yet awakened to the need and feasibility of combating these leaders among the causes of death.

However, our greatest disappointment lies in our failure to duplicate the gains of last year against motor vehicle accidents. Apparently, the gains registered in this direction during the earlier part of the year have been dissipated in the closing months. The remarkably fine weather this autumn has been conducive to increased motoring, with its accom-

panying grist of fatal accidents. Unless a radical change for the better occurs in the next few weeks, which seems unlikely, the number of automobile deaths this year will exceed those reported in 1938 and may run as high as 33,000.

As to the prospects for the coming year, it is perhaps too much to expect a continuation of the exceptionally favorable conditions that have prevailed during the last two years. Nevertheless, at the present writing, there is nothing that would lead one to expect otherwise. We cannot, of course, anticipate the so-called "acts of God" such as earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, etc., nor can we foresee very far in advance such visitations as the great pandemic of influenza which overwhelmed the country in the fall of 1918.

Great wars often breed widespread epidemics of diseases which ordinarily are kept under control and for that reason it is possible that we may have to cope with such an aftermath of the present deplorable situation in Europe. But this danger will be greatly mitigated if we persist in our determination not to be drawn into the conflict.

Barring such contingencies, there is every reason to believe that 1940 will be another year of good health for the American people. For one thing, there never has been a time when the people as a whole and as individuals were so health conscious as at present. More and

RADIO

W. H. Cameron, of the National Safety Council will tell how you can help reduce accidents as guest scientist on "Adventures in Science" with Watson Davis, director of Science Service, over the coast to coast network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Thursday, January 11, 4:15 p.m., EST, 3:15 CST, 2:15 MST, 1:15 PST. Watson Davis will forecast 1940's science progress on January 4, 4:15 p.m. EST. Listen in on your local station. Listen in each Thursday.

more they are coming to realize the important place that good health has in our national economy.

Accordingly, they are demanding that the very best in the way of medical care be available to every element of the population regardless of social or economic status, whether in the remote rural sections of the country or in the large urban centers. When millions of individuals become intelligently interested in their personal health it constitutes a tremendous cooperative force that is bound to advance public welfare generally.

Already this public interest in health has begun to work wonders. It has freed us from the old taboo against the word "syphilis" so that now we are at last launched on a nationwide campaign which promises to minimize this scourge to our people.

It has brought about a unanimity of opinion among the medical profession, public health authorities, social workers and government officials concerning the necessity of drastic revision of our public health structure which seemed hopeless only a few years ago. True, there is still some divergence of opinion as to how this revision shall be brought about but there is little doubt that these differences will be adjusted satisfactorily in the near future. A National Health Law will probably be passed by Congress at its coming session and while the effects of this program are not likely to be felt immediately it is sure to benefit the health of the nation in the years to come.

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