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LUNCHEON MEETING

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NEW LAWS RELATING TO THE FEEBLE-MINDED
AND SOME STATISTICS

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There is a story about a college professor who was driving with a livery horse and carriage through a rural community down south when his harness broke suddenly and he was obliged to stop. He was sitting by the roadside wondering how he would get to the next town when a little negro boy ambled up and inquired the trouble. The professor told him that the harness was broken and he did not know how he could get to town. The boy looked the harness over, found the broken trace, pulled out his knife and cutting a few holes in the leather fastened the broken ends together with a piece of wild grape vine hanging conveniently near. “There boss, I guess you can get to town alright now” he said. But the professor did not move on. Instead he sat lost in thought. The pickaninny was puzzled: “What’s the matter, boss, ain’t that alright?” he asked. The professor replied slowly, “Yes, but what I can’t understand is why I, a college professor, couldn’t fix that harness and yet a little boy like you could do it in a minute.” “Oh, that’s easy,” answered the pickaninny, “some folks are just naturally smarter than others.”

With the development of psychological examinations we are proving the truth of this pickaninny’s observation. Some people are naturally smarter than others and no amount of education will bring the duller group up to the intellectual level of the brighter. However, this duller group does not need to be a burden to society. If society realizes the inherent differences in human abilities and educate each member according to his needs, providing also additional guidance and restraint for those too deficient mentally to be able to meet unaided the demands and complex situations of our present day civilization.

This meeting of officials charged with the enforcement of laws relating to children seemed to present an opportunity to discuss the mentally defective members of society, those persons whose minds never develop far enough to enable them to “manage themselves and their affairs” with ordinary prudence, and to tell you about the amendments to our compulsory commitment law for the feeble-minded, which were passed at the 1923 session of legislature. In 1917, the Minnesota legislature enacted a law providing for the commitment and guardianship of the feeble-minded. We have found in working with the several hundred cases committed under this law that it was not quite perfect, though it is one of the best in the United States, so we have from time to time had it amended. The bills, framed in order to facilitate our work with this group and provide some safeguards which the original statute does not possess, were based on the needs of actual cases in the Children’s Bureau.

In order that you may understand their import, may I recall to you briefly as I go along the form of the original law. The compulsory commitment law as it is called, in contrast to the old statute permitting voluntary admission of feeble-minded to the state institution, makes possible the commitment by the probate court and two physicians forming a board of examiners, of any person adjudged feeble-minded, regardless of the age of the patient or the wishes of the patient or parents, provided that the patient comes within the legal definition of a feeble-minded person, i.e. — “any person, minor or adult, other than an insane person, who is so mentally defective as to be incapable of managing himself and his affairs and to require supervision, control and care for his own or the public welfare.” The commitment is made to the State Board of Control, thus allowing the Board to place the patient in the appropriate institution or to keep him under supervision in the community.

The first amendment was devised to provide better supervision for the patients who are on parole in the community. Some of the child welfare boards have not understood why the children’s bureau asked them to investigate cases of adult feeble-minded persons. We have always contended that since these wards are children in mind, they should be cared for through the community child welfare boards, regardless of age, especially since so many of the cases involve children also. This amendment now makes it legal for us to ask the child welfare boards to perform this service, for it reads that after a person is committed as feeble-minded the Board of Control can exercise “general supervision over him anywhere in this state outside any institution through any child welfare board or other appropriate agency thereto authorized by said Board of Control.”

The following case illustrates how this amendment is of assistance. Bessie, aged twenty-one, became known to the county child welfare board at the birth of her second illegitimate child which occurred after the family moved to this state. It was impossible to establish paternity because Bessie told the improbable story that the father of her baby was some stranger who picked her up one night and took her to a dance, though the neighbors stated that in their opinion the stepfather was the father of Bessie’s two children. A mental examination showed that Bessie was not feeble-minded. However, it was possible for the child welfare board to work with Bessie as well as her illegitimate child, the commitment seemed more reasonable to all concerned following as it did immediately upon the discovery of her misconduct, and the friendly contact established between the Board and the girl at the time she needed assistance in preparing for her confinement, as was carried over after her commitment as feeble-minded to the guardianship of the Board of Control, thus making possible a supervision by kindly suggestions and warnings, rather than by rules and discipline.

The second amendment I wish to bring to your attention was framed to insure better supervision for the feeble-minded. There have been several patients whom we felt we could not parole because we feared the relatives would not protect them sufficiently unless we could somehow impress them strongly with their responsibility. Few of our patients’ relatives can afford to lose much money so we decided that if they gave a bond guaranteeing the good conduct of a patient paroled to them they would exercise closer supervision than on any other condition, and we asked to have this amendment passed. “Upon the request of the relatives or friends of any person alleged or found to be feeble-minded they...
orphanage, was sent to a private family where he did not do well. From them was committed as feeble-minded after a long acquaintance with various social agencies thereof, from expense of any nature arising or resulting from any act or misconduct of such feeble-minded person committed while in their care.

This is the type of case which we parole under bond. Edna, age twenty-three, with a mental age of eight became pregnant by her employer while she was working out and gave birth to an illegitimate child in 1920. An investigation showed that the girl's mother was dead and her father had never given her any attention, keeping her out of school to work after the mother's death and then allowed her to go off to work when a younger sister grew old enough to do the housework. Paternity was established and the baby placed in a private family to board, since we found Edna was not intelligent enough to care for the child. Then Edna was committed as feeble-minded and sent to an institution. At first, when the father made application for Edna's parole we did not feel that we could permit it, because the family has always been outside the social life of the community centering about the church, but when more intelligent and responsible relatives became interested and offered to act as the father's sureties on a bond of $1,500, we paroled the girl to live in her father's home. We are certain that with this sum at stake the relatives and the father will protect the girl against any trial in said probate court and it shall be the duty of said court forthwith to transmit same to the clerk of said district court.

The three pieces of legislation relating to the feeble-minded which were enacted by the 1923 legislature are these, the amendment authorizing the Board of Control to exercise supervision of a feeble-minded ward through the county child welfare board, one permitting the Board to parole feeble-minded patients under bond, and one providing for an appeal from probate to district court in the question of discharge of patients committed as feeble-minded to the guardianship of the Board.

Before bringing to your attention recent legislation regarding the feeble-minded, I want to try to give you some idea of the extent of feeble-mindedness among children in various school districts and the number of feeble-minded inmates in the different state institutions. He found that 26% of the men at the St. Cloud Reformatory were feeble-minded, 30% of the girls at the Home School in Sauk Centre, and 35% of the boys at the Red Wing Training School. In the special...
classes of the public schools throughout the state, according to the figures of the Board of Education, there are about 1,500 children whose intelligence is less than 75% normal. These classes are held in only forty-three towns in Minnesota and we do not have complete figures on the number of subnormal children in the regular classes in other communities. However, it is estimated by the leading psychologists of the country that from one to two per cent of the school population is feeble-minded.

Yet, despite the large number of the feeble-minded in the population, there is only one institution in the state to care for them. It has some 1,900 patients and since it is always filled to capacity and new commitments come in on an average of twenty-seven a month, we have a long waiting list. We can not begin to provide adequate training facilities for the younger feeble-minded patients or custodial care for the helpless and the anti-social ones until we have another institution. We are following the same expensive but short-sighted program with the mental defectives as with the delinquents, maintaining costly institutions and courts in an effort to break them of bad habits when it would be much cheaper and infinitely more humane to train both groups when young in habits which will enable them to live among their fellows with the least amount of friction. Sufficient institutions should be built to care for the feeble-minded who will always need institutional care, effort should be made to secure special training for each educable defective either in the public school or in the state institution, that he may be fitted for a useful place in society later, and our system of county supervision for the extra-institutional case developed fully.

The word "feeble-minded" still suggests to many persons, even in this enlightened age, a very low-grade type,—the idiot or the low-grade imbecile. Not long ago, a young matron, seemingly intelligent and by her own statement, "very much interested in social problems," asked if it were possible for me to recommend a maid to do housework. She had been told by Mrs. W. that her maid, Helen, was doing very well and that she had been placed with Mrs. W. by the agent of the Child Welfare Board. It seemed that Mary might find a suitable place here so the matter of careful supervision and all the details connected with the girl's stay in this home were discussed. At the mention of the word "feeble-minded," young Mrs. A. became excited and burst out, "Oh is Mary feeble-minded? I didn't understand that. I just couldn't have a feeble-minded girl in my house. The mere sound of the word makes me ill,—they are such awful looking creatures. Surely, Helen in Mrs. W.'s home is not feeble-minded—she is such a nice, neat looking girl." I tried to assure her that Mary was not awful looking—in fact, quite the opposite,—very neat and good looking; that she was also quite capable of doing simple tasks about the house and always tried to do her very best; if carefully directed, Mary would probably develop into an efficient maid. But above all things, the needed guidance and supervision, even outside of the house; that she had been committed to the guardianship of the State Board of Control for this reason; that she was not an idiot or an imbecile but a moron. But young Mrs. A. could not get away from the awful sound of the word "feeble-minded".

For present purposes, we shall divide the large army of the feeble-minded into two general groups: the institutional and the extra-institutional cases.

The institutional cases are, of course, those cases which cannot be cared for outside an institution. This includes all types of the feeble-minded: the idiot and low grade imbecile who are always best taken care of in a state institution, and that moron who is found to be impossible as far as extra-institutional care is concerned.

Among the extra-institutional cases are a few idiots and low grade imbeciles whose parents feel that they cannot possibly endure the thought of allowing the child to live in a state institution and are anxious to keep the child at home. Where there is sufficient guarantee that the child will receive good physical care and will not cause the other children in the home to be neglected, the child is allowed to remain in the home and is visited regularly. The majority of the extra-institutional cases are of the moron group, the highest type of the feeble-minded, comprising seventy-five percent of the entire group of subnormals. The cases discussed at this time are of the moron group.

With the large number of feeble-minded in the state, it cannot be considered a practical solution of the problem to place all of them in institutions. It would be a heavy financial burden and is neither necessary nor desirable. There will always be large numbers of feeble-minded in the community, even after more provision is made. The most practical thing to do, is to make still more liberal