

Comments on the scope, conduct and purposes of state institutions - A.C. Rogers

RETYPE FROM THE ORIGINAL

DISCUSSION (School for the Feeble Minded) BY

Dr. A.C. Rogers:

Mr. Chairman and gentlemen: I agree fully and heartily with the reader of the paper in his attitude toward the public. I believe that in our institution work we ought to be very frank with the public. Sometimes we suffer temporarily from it but in the end we always gain. While there are individuals who are thoughtless and jump at conclusions and have vivid imaginations and dream dreams of horror, the majority of the people are sensible; a majority of the people have at heart the welfare and best interests of our public institutions and realize that they are created to carry out grand purposes and that they are responsible in a measure for the accomplishment; and they have a right to know the real workings of our public institutions. I have personally insisted with my people that it made no difference who visited the institution, so far as they were concerned; that it made no difference, within reasonable hours, at what time they came. They must expect visitors, and especially parents, to be introduced into their sections or departments at any hour and that it is their lookout if things were not in proper shape. In cases of accident, and such things will occur in every institution, I believe it is right to be exceedingly frank with the public and, if necessary, to call at once a coroner, and have the whole matter investigated. I believe that these things pay...

The general subject has been so well covered by Mr. Randall that I will only hurriedly refer to a few minor matters that have attracted my attention and come under my notice in my personal institutional experience.

There is rather a common error with regard to the distinction between the purposes of an institution for feeble minded and one for insane. There are perhaps three reasons for this. In the first place, all works on insanity use the term "insanity" as a generic one and "idiocy" as a subdivision or one of the classifications of insanity. In the second place the history of the work for the care of the mentally defective, the development of the work for the feeble minded followed that of the care and treatment of the insane. This has been true, also, in each state where an institution has been built for the feeble minded; it has been built after the insane had been cared for. The confusion, therefore, is greater than it would have been if the institutions had been erected at the same time and the distinction disclosed at the start.

In the third place, there are many demented people in the hospitals for the insane whose habits are practically the same as those of epileptic, adult feeble minded and idiots that we have to care for, and their institution requirements are practically the same for both. So, for these three reasons, it is not at all surprising that the public have a misconception as to the distinction between the two institution. For practical purposes, we can make this distinction, however behavior in the insane and the feeble minded; and insane person is one whose mind has developed normally and follows adolescence, while a feeble minded person is one in whom arrested development occurs early in life. This

broad distinction is sufficient for all practical purposes and is recognized by a decision of the Attorney General of this state.

Another quite common error in my experience is the idea what any teacher is good enough for the feeble minded; anyone who can play a little on the piano is good enough to teach music to the feeble minded. A teacher for feeble minded should have the training and natural ability that a teacher in the common schools should possess and should, in addition to that have an unbounded amount of patience, should be exceedingly tactful in the handling of the various types and temperaments with which she has to deal; should be exceedingly resourceful as to methods and quick to apply new methods to new cases; in fact our children must be studied individually, very carefully and very closely.

Another quite common error which I hear from parents is that the association of one feeble minded child with another is injurious. This is a mistake. The association of feeble minded children with normal children is almost detrimental to them and in perhaps eight instances out of ten results in their being ridiculed and taunted and as a result they become discouraged and not only make no effort improve, but become distrustful of any one who tries to help them. Many a time the fact that a feeble minded child finds himself associated with those who have no greater mental strength than his own develops a new ambition from this feeling of equality and comradeship.

An error which was very common a few years ago, but less so now is that feeble-mindedness can be cured by a surgical operation. A few years ago a noted surgeon in Paris and later some surgeons in New York and Philadelphia operated upon children with small heads, the ossification of the fontanelles or sutures in the skulls of these cases having taken place very early. The theory was that these closures prevented perfect brain development, ignoring the physiological fact that bony covering adapts itself in the softer tissues in which the most active growth occurs. Although many operations were performed upon children with small heads the results were exceedingly unsatisfactory and so far as my own personal observation goes, the only cases in which there was a marked improvement were those who were under special training in schools for feeble minded afterwards, and the results were to be attributed to the training rather than to the surgical operations. While this illusion is not as common as it was, occasionally we have children presented to us with the request that their heads be operated upon at once.

Another very common error is the overestimation of what may be done in the training of feeble minded people. It is unreasonable to expect that a child who passes through the period of childhood without that normal spontaneity which causes it to experience innumerable sensations, the foundations of ideas, can ever afterwards, under the best system of training, not only make up for this loss, but go on acquiring sensations, ideas and experiences at the same rate that a normal child would through adolescence. A child that is feeble minded is always feeble minded, and its only question is as to the extent to which the development may be carried under proper training.

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