The Problem of the Feeble-minded III

How great is the impact of feeble-mindedness and its problems upon the case work of a child-caring society in Minneapolis under the conditions that exist today? I cannot give a scientifically-developed statistical answer to this question. Perhaps no one is prepared to give such an answer to it. However, I have endeavored to secure some figures and some facts that may give us an inkling of the force of that impact.

After Mrs. Greiner asked me to present a paper at this meeting I selected, entirely by chance and at random, 50 active cases from the files of the Children's Protective Society. The workers in charge of these cases were asked to give me information bearing on the incident of feeblemindedness in the cases. This information I present for your consideration.

1. Eighteen of these 50 cases contained persons who were feebleminded.

2. Sixteen of these 18 cases contained persons who had been determined by psychological tests to be feebleminded. These persons numbered 37.

3. There were other clients in 7 of the cases who were considered by the case workers to be feebleminded although they had not received a psychological test. These persons numbered 16.

4. Feeblemindedness was regarded as the principal cause of the client's difficulties in 13 out of the 50 cases.

5. The problems presented by the feebleminded persons in these 1f cases included the following:

dependency, 15 problems
neglect 15
sex delinquency 9
other delinquency 3
inability to appreciate need of medical care 10
inability to manage their own affairs 12.

To summarize, feeblemindedness and its problems were present in 36% of these 50 cases. Fifty-six feebleminded persons were included. They presented problems of dependency, delinquency, neglect and inability to understand and to manage.

The Children's Protective Society has approximately 700 active cases. If the cases considered in this brief examination are a fair sample of the case load of the Society, as I believe to be a fact, there must be approximately 250 cases in the active files of this Society alone where feeblemindedness exists and where it presents major problems. When we consider the number of other societies doing social case work in our city we may arrive at something like an adequate conception of the force of the impact of feeblemindedness upon the social agencies of our city.

NATURE OF PROBLEMS PRESENTED

The problems presented by the feebleminded are diverse and perplexing. While such persons share man's universal need of food and clothing and shelter, many of them lack the ability to work and earn wages with which to provide these necessities for themselves. If a husband, able to earn a living for himself and his family, has a feebleminded wife she may be unable to keep house properly. Perhaps she cannot plan meals or cannot prepare food properly. The husband may become discouraged and may desert his family or may become indifferent and lose his job. The family then become charges upon society, if they have not been such before.

Mental defectives have undiminished powers of procreation, but often have not the power to support children and generally have little or no ability either to guide or to discipline them. Often the children of a feebleminded mother by the time they are 10 years old have more intelligence than their mother and consequently dominate her.

A mother in a Children's Protective Society case has an intelligence quotient of 42. Her 11 year old son has an intelligence quotient of 102. Where do you think the leadership lies between mother and child? In another case the mother has an intelligence quotient of 52. Her productivity is quite out of line with her mental power, for she has brought 16 children into the world. One is in the Faribault institution. Most of the others are rated in the eighties. Intellectually nature's order is reversed and the children lead the mother by the hand, or they go whither they will, do what they wish and pay no heed to her.

Despite what I have said, there is occasionally a feebleminded mother who does notably well in keeping her home together and rearing her children. Mrs. B. has an intelligence quotient of 56. She was left a widow at the age of 35, the mother of 6 children ranging in age from 4 to 14 years. County Aid was refused to Mrs. B. for the stated reason that she was considered incapable of having custody of her children. The case finally landed on the doorstep of the Children's Protective Society. Under careful supervision, in which a representative of the Federation of Churches played an important part, Mrs. B. has managed her home successfully for 7 years and brought up her children to be well behaved, law abiding, and helpful to their mother. The children were mostly in the dull normal group.

A fundamental difficulty in dealing with many of the feebleminded is their inability to comprehend what the social worker is attempting to bring about. They do not feel the need of improvement. It requires the greatest tact and persistency to secure and retain their cooperation in any effort to improve permanently their standards of living.

Perhaps the most difficult of all the feebleminded for the social worker to deal with is the highgrade moron. This person is vain in his own conceit. He considers himself entirely capable of directing his own affairs. He is bound to be the captain of his own fate; he runs his ship upon the rocks and finds a temporary snug harbor in a hospital or a reformatory.

OUR PRESENT METHODS

Few social case workers if any, I fear, have developed any special technique of dealing with the feebleminded. Most of us feel that such technique as we have is thin and inadequate. We approach the problem of the feebleminded with a sense of hopelessness. When we fail we are not disappointed; when we succeed we are elated.

The method which we first employ is persuasion. We attempt to present logically and attractively an argument in favor of the course of action we desire the feebleminded person to pursue. This method requires not only skill and understanding but an extreme degree of patience, for the arguments must be made simple; they must be iterated and reiterated in the hope that they may finally become a part of the client's thinking. This method is successful in some cases.

Failing persuasion we undertake coercion. This we do generally by sending the clients into court, threatening or at least suggesting the loss of their rights as parents. Very often the court method is effective at least for a time. Fear of the law and the power of the court seems to be as potent in dealing with the feebleminded as with children.

When a court order fails, and especially in the case of very low-grade persons, our attempted remedy is institutionalization. The difficulties that beset this path are well known to you. Institutions for the feebleminded are limited in number and in size. Some persons that we think ought to be committed to institutions are not considered by the committing authorities to be proper institutional cases. Even when the commitment is with a view only to sterilization it is often impossible for the social worker to get those who have the power of commitment to concur with her view. Institutionalization is therefore limited in its scope, although effective and generally definitive in its results when it can be used.

Sterilization is a remedy to which the social worker would often resort. As the laws now provide this remedy is not likely to be applied to any considerable number of our feebleminded population. It has in some cases worked out well in families where there were already enough children and the mother and father were convinced that there should not be any more. My own impression is that so far as the practice has yet been carried it is not a major consideration in dealing with our problem of feeblemindedness.

A final present method which is known to all of you and probably practiced by most of you is ignoring. We cannot see anything to be done and therefore we ignore the situation. We feel ourselves to be helpless--there is nothing we can do about it. Therefore we close our eyes to it and pass on.

HOW MIGHT WE HANDLE THE PROBLEM BETTER

First of all I think by improving economic conditions. Generally speaking the feebleminded live in a neighborhood environment which tends strongly to make them delinquents. Many of them are very suggestible. The sort of suggestions that they receive in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods in which they live are not such as to make for their good or for the

good of society. The improvement of economic conditions would perhaps have less influence on this generation than upon the generations to come. The grind of poverty and the industrial strain place a severe limitation upon the lower strata of society in respect to nearly all of life's important choices. This is true as to mating as well as to nearly all other matters. It is to my mind highly probable that many of the feeble-minded strains that have developed in our society have done so because of unfortunate matings, which in turn are the result of the pressure of low economic status.

Sterilization is in my opinion a questionable remedy. First, because society is as a whole very far from being prepared for such drastic procedure. Second, because sterilization would have to be very widespread to obliterate feebleminded strains. Third, because of the very great difficulty of agreeing upon a line of demarcation below which sterilization may take place and above which it may not take place.

The remedy most likely to give us help in the future is greatly increased social control. The paper presented by Dr. Kuhlmann at our last meeting seems to me, if I may venture to say so, to be wise and to be far reaching in its implications. We must know both the mental status and the social-economic status of our children. We must provide social control not only throughout childhood but throughout life for those persons of low mentality, for whom such control is not provided by competent relatives. The public school should constitute our first line of defense in the battle against feeblemindedness. A constant well-planned effort should be made to acquaint the public at large with the enormous social and economic cost to it of feeblemindedness. Only thus shall we be able to secure authorization through legal measures of that degree of social control of the feebleminded which is essential to dealing successfully with the problem.

Anent a greater measure of social control, may I in closing tell briefly of an experiment the Children's Protective Society had recently made? We have attempted the use of housekeepers in homes of feeble-minded parents. This we have done in four cases.

In the first case both father and mother are feeble-minded. The father has worked steadily and for several years has paid regularly into the office of the Children's Protective Society about $11 a week toward the board of his three children in a family boarding home. The mother in this case was sent to an institution, was sterilized and returned to her home. The father had frequently implored the Children's Protective Society to place his children back in his home. His fidelity to his obligations inclined us to try the experiment. We placed a good housekeeper in this home and returned the children. The experiment lasted about two weeks. The mother refused to yield authority to the housekeeper and incited the children against her. The father was unable to control the situation. The housekeeper was removed and the children were returned to the boarding home.

In the second case the feebleminded mother was out of the home. The father, who was in the home, was of low-grade mentality. He could not without assistance care properly for the six children. A housekeeper was placed in the home. The first housekeeper remained with the family about two weeks. She found the work and the responsibility too great for her. The second housekeeper got along well in the home. She remained about five weeks. This housekeeper was capable and intelligent. She brought about improvement in the manners and conduct of the children during her short stay. The father objected to her conduct of the household affairs and she was obliged to leave. At the same time he made a request to the State Board of Control that his wife be returned to the family. The third housekeeper was getting along well with her problem when the mother was returned to the home and the housekeeper was removed. We felt that there was a prospect that the housekeeper plan might work out satisfactorily with this family.

In the third case the mother has an intelligence quotient of 62; the father has an intelligence quotient of 70. Both are in the home. There are four children at home and another is expected shortly. The four children range in age from one year to four. The mother was incapable of dealing with the dietary and other problems of the children. She would not cooperate with the Infant Welfare nurse. We secured consent of the father and mother to put a housekeeper in the family. We have had a housekeeper there since last February. The children are being properly fed, they are in good physical condition, they are attending Infant Welfare Clinic regularly. There is harmony in the home. The family is living within its income--a thing that it never was able to do before the advent of the housekeeper. Thus far the plan has worked admirably. Our worker in charge of the case feels that the mother has acquired excellent training during this period and may be able, after a time, to carry along alone. As in all such cases we cannot speak with too great confidence regarding the future.

In the fourth case the mother is in the Hospital for the Insane at Rochester. The father has an intelligence rating of 78. Our worker feels that the psychometrist flattered him. There are 7 children ranging in age from 2 to 12 years and the intelligence rating of the children ranges from 70 to 101. The majority are in the dull normal group.

We have had a housekeeper in this family since last November. The father earns from $10 to $15 a week. He uses all of this income toward the support of his family. He receives some assistance from the Department of Public Relief. Our Society pays for the housekeeper.

The family formerly lived in a hovel. There were broken windows, vermin, dirt everywhere. The children were poorly clad and had pieces of coal for playthings. Under the new regime they have been living for several months in a decent locality in a fairly good house with adequate sleeping accommodations. The children are neat, clean, well behaved and appear on the whole to be rather attractive. The father has been thoroughly cooperative and is greatly pleased with the condition that now prevails in the family. There is every prospect that this may work out as a thoroughly satisfactory, rather permanent plan.

I offer these inchoate efforts of our Society toward greater social control of the feebleminded not as proof, but rather as suggestive of what might be accomplished even without further legislation through wise cooperative effort.

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