



EARLY DAYS

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Section Editors

This Condition of Widespread Ignorance

This month Early Days will look at articles and other parts of *School Science and Mathematics* regarding issues of health and its relation to science teaching. The material for this column is drawn from two randomly selected years of the journal, 1910 and 1930. The health-related topics presented are quite different for the two different years, with issues related to sexual hygiene dominating the health topics of the earlier volume and topics related to nutrition and disease prominent in the latter.

The topic of sexual hygiene was clearly of a controversial nature in 1910. However, four different full length articles were published on the topic during this volume. At the beginning of the first article, an editorial disclaimer spoke to the potential controversy arising from its publication.

The subject of sex hygiene is one that is very much alive at present. Whether Mr. Hahn presents in all particulars the proper method for combating the evils arising out of sex, can probably be better determined after we have experimented more with methods of approach. In the beginning we ought to take warning from our experience in teaching the topic of alcohol and narcotics, and avoid dogmatism, which itself is an evil of the greatest magnitude.

Successful experiments in teaching sex hygiene should be published for the benefit of those teachers who are still casting about in the effort to find a safe way to begin. Let us have more facts and more discussion. Ed. (p. 431)

The article to which this rather liberal disclaimer was attached was written by Clarence Hahn and titled "Sex Hygiene as a Part of a Course in Biology for Boys and Girls of Thirteen to Sixteen Years." He began,

For several years a course similar to that following has been given with apparently satisfactory results.... Its growth has been gradual and sex hygiene a constant feature through a period of five years. For over a year the principle of "Prolongation of youth" or "Care and protection of young" has been employed for the purpose of emphasizing the true purpose of many sexual processes in animals, especially those that concern the human

race. Lack of knowledge of these processes has been the cause of an unnatural and harmful modesty and has involved mankind in vices which threaten the demoralization of society and finally are means of transmitting diseases of a character detrimental to the individual, to the offspring, and to the society in general. (p. 431)

The reader learns about how the course first deals with reproduction in flowers, fish, amphibia, reptilia, birds, and then mammals. In the closing paragraphs, Hahn turns his attention to the moral and physical problems associated with sexual relations.

...Sometimes parents fail to teach their children how to properly care for themselves. Bad health, poor teeth, and immoral habits leading to degradation and death result. Masturbation in early youth may so weaken and destroy the vitality of a boy as to render him a public charge for lifetime. Home conditions may so demoralize a youth as to make him incapable of living in society with the proper moral relation to the opposite sex. In consequence of dangerous venereal diseases contracted through the improper use of the generative organs of both sexes, the protection afforded by any family may be and is continually being turned into a curse upon the children as well as the cause of disease and death of the offending parties. (p. 434)

Speaking specifically regarding venereal disease he continued,

The danger of youth encountering this "Great Black Plague" is due chiefly to their ignorance of its terrible consequences. The fact that 60% of the males of this country are afflicted at some time in the early part of their lives by one or the other of the above-mentioned diseases, is evidence that the sacred law of nature which works for the protection of the young of a species is transgressed, most of all, by mankind. (p. 434)

Hahn's article from the May 1910 issue was followed by another article with a similar title in the June issue. This piece, titled "The Teaching of Sexual Hygiene: Matter and Methods," was written by Winfield S. Hall, who had both PhD and MD credentials. He began by confirming Hahn's notion that bad habits in youth can and will become habitual in adults and that

the responsibility “rest[s] upon the shoulders of the parents.” But he goes on to report that “statistics gathered from a number of representative colleges in the middle states show that only one young man in twenty receives from his parents any adequate instruction on these subjects before leaving home” (p. 470). He continued,

This condition of widespread ignorance regarding some of the most fundamentally important questions of social life and individual development came gradually to be understood among educators and professional men and women, and finally a representative body of educators, physicians, clergymen, lawyers, and social workers met in New York City four years ago and organized a Society of Social and Moral Prophylaxis, whose object as indicated in the name of the Society was by the dissemination of information to protect the individual and the body social against the dissemination not only of physical disease, which wrecks both, but of those low ideals and vicious customs which make the highest life impossible. (p. 470)

Hall believed that the first consideration in teaching about sexual hygiene was to separate the audience so that “boy hearers should be separated from men hearers.” And likewise mothers should be separated from fathers, as well as from their daughters. In a heterogeneous audience, “the circumlocutions would be so veiled and the allusions so remote that the speaker would be only vaguely understood by the more intelligent and experienced of his audience” (p. 470).

Hall continued,

A group of older boys, fourteen to seventeen, may be given another chapter in the story of reproduction. Boys of that age are beginning to experience the “Primordial urge” or sexual desire. Many boys of fourteen come to believe that all natural desires should be gratified, but the teacher of sexual hygiene must explain to the youths that the fires of passion must be banked, in order that the energies of manhood may be conserved to a time when they may be put to their legitimate use, namely, the begetting of healthy offspring after the establishment of the home. (p. 472)

Following Hall’s article on sexual hygiene was an article by Edgar Van Buskirk, titled “Physiology and Hygiene in our Elementary Schools.” This article is a research study conducted by the author to ascertain the quantity and quality of content on physiology and hygiene in textbooks. The study involved the examination of 40 textbooks, 12 reference books and 73 curricula of city and country schools in the US. He was

compelled to study this after personally witnessing “6 to 8 barelegged boys wading in sewage that had been pumped up into a gutter” (p. 474). He found that, due to compulsory legislation, the subject was covered widely. His conclusions were as follows:

First, a study of the time element leads to the inference that physiology and hygiene does not have the important place in the elementary school curriculum that the public apparently desires it to hold.

Second...too much time is devoted to anatomy...hygiene might well receive more attention...the practical phase of the work deserves more recognition.

He also found that the material was not presented from a child’s point of view, textbooks were generally unsatisfactory, reference books were rarely suggested in the curricula, and “practical hygiene” was not given adequate prominence.

The last article from 1910 on the topic of hygiene returns to the now familiar topic of “Sexual Hygiene” and is again written by a medical doctor, A. L. Blackwood. This article is clearly the most frank statement of the ills that may befall children and adolescents with regard to sex. Graffiti is a prime concern.

Unless careful attention is devoted to the toilets the child’s mind becomes polluted by indecent writing and by allowing the children to tarry in the toilets longer than necessity demands. From a careful inspection of the toilets of many schools the inference is that there is but little difference between the toilets of the boys and those of the girls. And in spite of the janitor’s removal of all writing at each recess it would appear again before the next. By a concerted action of the janitor, principal, and head assistant the offender can usually soon be brought to light. (p. 732-733)

As with Professor Hall, Blackwood discusses the “primordial urge” and the need to segregate the audience by sex and age, but he then makes a statement that must have been even more controversial than the topic of sex.

There is afloat in the world a conception that one may through the aid of the gospel avoid the natural consequences of his deeds. How frequently do we hear such a doctrine expounded from the pulpit; of the praise that is bestowed upon those who late in life have been freed from their evil ways. But it is doubtful if the saved life, into which repentance has come, has brought the strange sense of peace desired. It is doubtful if the repentance can ever give him back the calm strength and poise of assured moral mastery, for vice has assuredly left a mark of disease that no amount of peace can renew. (p. 733)

Blackwood, too, stated several of the misconceptions of his day. He believed that venereal disease spread could be reduced through "the introduction of drinking fountains, the individual pencil, sponge, the improved toilet facility...The removal of the anterior part of the toilet seat that comes in contact with the genitals is to be commended" (p. 735).

The health emphases mentioned in the 1930 volume of *SSM* were of a very different character. The heavy emphasis on sexual issues was not found there at all. Rather the shift was toward the discussion of disease and the presentation of issues through much briefer articles provided through the Science Service.

For instance, a news brief in the April 1930 issue was titled "Parrot disease' not New." This brief dealt with an outbreak of Parrot's fever in Maryland.

The parrot disease' so called, is a novelty to physicians of the United States, although it is by no means new to medical science. With symptoms strongly resembling pneumonia and typhoid fever, psittacosis has presented difficulties in accurate diagnosis. Doctors have assured the public, incidentally, that the disease is rare, and that there is no danger of an epidemic. (p. 464)

Another example was a news brief reprinted from the Science Service titled "Sugar Injection Saves Life in Veronal Poisoning."

The injection of a large volume of sugar solution into a vein enables the patient or the experimental animal to recover from the effects of veronal poisoning....A woman who had taken 60 grains of veronal apparently with suicidal intentions, was given one and one-half liter sugar solution three to four hours later. The injection produced a marked increase in the secretion of urine....There is little doubt that increasing the efficiency of the kidneys by injections of large volumes of fluids will continue to save life in accidental and intentional veronal poisoning. (p. 769)

A third example of a news brief regarding health issues was titled "Infant Deaths Decrease in the U.S."

The death rate of babies during the first year of life has decreased considerably in this country during the last fifteen years. At present, the rate is 67 per 1,000 births. This does not yet equal the very low rate of New Zealand which has for years held the record in the matter of low infant death rate. There the present rate is 36 per 1,000. (p. 782)

Three other examples were also found in the 1930 volume of *SSM*. The first dealt with the issue of health and resignations from department store sales forces. It reported that 1 in 10 resignations was due to ill health.

The second brief dealt with a new treatment for poison ivy irritation. The AMA reported that benzoyl peroxide in powdered form would neutralize the poison called "toxicodendrol" and thus reduce the itching associated with poison ivy irritation.

Finally, a news brief was published dealing with paternity tests. It said that a paternity test using blood typing should not be conducted until the infant was at least 2 weeks old, due to the possible influence by the mother's blood type.

Two other articles in the 1930 volume of *SSM* also dealt with health issues, though neither was truly a full length feature article. One was titled "A Scientific Basis for Health Instruction in Public Schools." This article was in fact a review of research originally conducted by Dr. Laura Cairns and published by the University of California Press. Some of the findings reported included

Health instruction which fails to teach the fundamental fails to function in health promotion. This failure is largely due to the fact that teacher-prejudices rather than scientific information determine health instruction.

The responsibility for health instruction is not always carried by those who should assume the major portion; that is, by the teachers of the fundamental sciences, who have the necessary foundations and facilities.

The chief responsibility for health instruction should not be placed on the physical education departments. They have other objectives than health education and cannot take the time from their activity programs to give pupils the scientific background necessary for intelligent health practices. Any attempt to assume this responsibility by groups other than those prepared to teach the underlying principles and having laboratories where the students may have first hand experiences, results in dogmatic instruction. (p. 954)

Finally there was an article titled "Dividends on Health Assets." This article related the availability of a health assets inventory from the National Tuberculosis Association.

The inventory was created so that teachers could collect "before" and "after" data while making their school more environmentally friendly with regard to the beliefs about disease transmission. Items on the inventory included "Is the ventilation of the school-room good?" "Is there medical inspection of the children?" "How many (students) sleep long hours with the windows open?" and "How many look like healthy, happy children?"

Through the pages of *SSM*, health concerns were frequently put forward to inform teachers and to motivate them to act. In this manner, *SSM* played an important role in influencing teachers toward teaching that was not only factually accurate, but morally appropriate for these earlier times. Many of these issues are no longer at the forefront of our consciousness as educators, but many are still of concern to the public.

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