A CLINICAL CONSIDERATION OF MENTAL DEFICIENCY

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The term mental deficiency describes or sets apart a large heterogeneous group of individuals who have but one characteristic in common, an inefficiently functioning intelligence. The concept of intelligence as a particular form of mental functioning, rather than a form of mental structure, is emphasized because it lends itself to a more constructive clinical approach. The older conservative orthodoxy of intelligence as a mental structure entails the assumption that a mentally deficient person has an irremediable defect or lack of intelligence of a greater or less degree. Those of us, however, who have had the opportunity of making careful clinical studies of mental defectives over a period of years find that such a concept is not tenable in all cases. Raymond,¹ of the Walter E. Fernald State School, writes in an article entitled, "Intellectual Development in Morons Beyond the Chronological Age of Sixteen Years," in Volume 32 of the proceedings of the American Association for the Study of the Feebleminded. "It has been the writer's privilege to watch hundreds of boys and girls go through several years of training at the Walter E. Fernald State School and then return to community life. It has been amazing to see the vast improvement in poise, self-assurance and general appearance which many of these exhibit and to learn about the types of work satisfactorily and continuously performed and the wages received for such work. In fact the improvement has been so great in many of them that it is doubtful that any psychiatrist would be justified in calling them feebleminded. These same individuals, however, when little children and up to the age of at least 16 years, would be definitely classed as morons by all the yardsticks which we have for measuring intellectual capacity. There has been an opportunity to re-test these patients psychologically and many, even when past 20 years of age, have shown an increase of from six months to several years in mental age beyond that shown when they were 14 or 16 years of age." Camp and Waite,² in a report of four
cases of mental deficiency on parole from Letchworth Village published in the proceedings of the American Association for the Study of the Feebleminded, Volume 37, emphasized the same observations. Thus at the outset, when we refer to careful clinical study, we are already confronted with the need for a careful evaluation of this function we call intelligence.

The most generally accepted definition of intelligence is that of Stern in which he defines it as "The general capacity of an individual consciously to adjust his thinking to new requirements." This definition may be amplified by stating that intelligence is expressed physiologically through a complicated sequence of mental activity whereby an individual is enabled to perceive, memorize, associate and utilize experiences of the past in dealing with situations of the present. It may be predicated that the efficiency of the functioning of intelligence depends upon the complexity and integrity of the structural elements of the central nervous system, the quality of the physico-chemical equilibrium and the nature of the integration of the emotions.

Structural inadequacy of the central nervous system of either endogenous or exogenous origin may so reduce or interfere with intelligence functioning that the individual is rendered inefficient to a greater or less degree. The individual contacts his environment through the special senses. Stimuli thus received are carried along the efferent pathways to the brain cortex where the impressions they create are stored and constitute what is called memory. These countless memories are of value to the individual only insofar as they can be utilized by that process which is called association. The recent studies of Tilney on brain lipoids suggest that the amount of intelligence is dependent, among other things, on the richness of the inter-convolutional association fibres. Economo and Tilney have shown that the more highly evolved the species, the more complex is the architecture of the cerebral cortex. The recent discussion of Donaldson of the Wister Institute regarding the work of Hindze in Moscow and Paris indicates that there may be a very close relationship between the richness of the vascular supply to the brain and intelligence.

Children with certain types of lesions, namely, subcortical and