ARE MENTAL DISEASES ON THE INCREASE?

Excerpts from the round table discussion at the twenty-eight annual meeting of the American Psychopathological Association, held at Atlantic City, N. Y., May 4, 1938.

INTRODUCTION

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The continued advances of medical science in the field of acute infectious diseases have brought into prominence a new frontier, that of chronic illness, and in this area the mental diseases occupy a foremost place. It has been estimated that about 1 per cent of the general population, or nearly 1,300,000 individuals, are incapacitated because of some form of mental illness or handicap at any one given time. The amount spent for the care of the half-million hospitalized patients alone is well over $166,000,000 annually. The latter occupy approximately 47 per cent of all hospital beds in the United States. About 97 per cent of these patients are cared for in state hospitals and institutions, and the maintenance expenditures for these patients account for 7 per cent of all state budgets.

In view of the importance of this problem a discussion was held at the annual meeting of the American Psychopathological Association. Dr. Abraham Myerson served as moderator and the following workers in this field participated: Dr. Harold F. Dorn, United States Public Health Service; Dr. Benjamin Malzberg, New York State Department of Mental Hygiene; Dr. Henry B. Elkind, Massachusetts Society for Mental Hygiene; Dr. Carney Landis, Columbia University and New York State Psychiatric Institute and Hospital, and Dr. James D. Page, department of psychology, University of Rochester. Their papers were discussed by Dr. Ellen Winston, Works Progress Administration; Dr. Emil Frankel, New Jersey State Department of Institutions and Agencies; Dr. Joseph E. Raycroft, New Jersey State Department of Institutions and Agencies; Mr. Joe S. Jacob, University of Georgia; Dr. N. D. M. Hirsch, Social Security Board, and the writer. The discussion was summarized by the moderator.
Before presenting the papers themselves it is necessary to define certain general terms and statistical concepts that occur frequently. The question of whether mental diseases are on the increase may be treated from several points of view.

The administrator of institutions for the care of patients is interested in this problem from the point of view of predicting the future needs of his hospitals . . .

The legislator and the average layman whom the administrator calls upon for tax funds would like to know how much money would be needed for caring for all these patients . . .

The epidemiologist, on the other hand, would not be so interested in the increase in costs nor in the total increase in all types of mental disease, as he would be in the increases by specific categories of diagnosis. . . .

The sociologist, while interested in the general trend of mental diseases, would be interested more specifically in the trends in the various social groupings of the population—urban and rural, socio-economic levels, and the ecology of mental disease . . .

The statistician of mental disease is of course interested in all of these questions, since he must prepare his statistics in such manner as to throw light on these problems.

Some of these questions cannot be answered fully or adequately by the data now on hand because these data are based primarily on hospital reports and not on a complete census of the general population. The total number of the mentally ill can only be guessed at. Even the data that we have on hand are not uniform from state to state. Most of the patients included in these reports are diagnosed as with psychosis but even in progressive states like Massachusetts, New York and Illinois a goodly number of patients diagnosed as without psychosis are included . . .

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The prevalence of a disease is determined by correlating the number of patients suffering from the disease at any one time with the general population. This prevalence is usually expressed as a rate per 100,000 of the general population. The prevalence of hospitalized mental disease is expressed similarly as the number of patients in the mental hospitals per 100,000 of the general population. But mental disease is largely chronic and the average length