State Care of High-Grade Imbecile Girls

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In the title of this paper I have used the term "high-grade imbecile" to denote the higher grades of mental deficiency, those approaching most nearly to the normal type.

It is only of late, through the more careful study of institutional inmates, that we have been able to recognize the more typical cases of this class. They approach too closely to the lowest types of the normal to be distinguished readily without more or less protracted observation. For this reason it is impossible to recognize this class at the out-patient department of the hospital or at the polyclinics. It is only by a careful consideration of their intellectual, moral and practical capabilities that a diagnosis can be made.

In order to place as clearly as possible before you the problem which confronts us, I must describe accurately the class of girls to which I refer. It is scarcely needful for me to state that the line between the high-grade mental defective and the low-grade normal youth is not clear, marked, abrupt and definite, but on the other hand has always been and must by its nature be a more or less shifting one. Moreover, our tests in relation to intellectual and practical capacities are even yet inadequately determined or unsettled. We have hitherto only vaguely known what powers we had a right to expect in the normal person and below what level we were justified in considering a child defective. As the study of the less developed children and youths has become more careful and more scientific, the border-line between the defective and the normal has been raised and this elevation of the border-line has a constant tendency to increase with more special study. This means that as we more carefully study and examine, we find that we can differentiate from the normal child or person higher grades of defectives. Cases which in former times would only have been called peculiar or criminal we find to be so much below the average that we acknowledge them as defectives. The increase of knowledge in regard to these classes is due not only to the more careful study and examination of the higher grades of defectives in institutions correctional or other, but among scientific men has been greatly advanced through the perception of the fact, on which I have long laid great stress, that the intellectual test alone is not the only touchstone of mental deficiency. The mental powers in man are not distributed in proportional amounts in each case. Any given individual may have certain powers or capacities ranging high—say 90 per
cent. and others ranging low—say 10 per cent. The intellectual capacities alone cannot be taken as the index of the brain power.*

It is only by taking measure of the brain forces in these ways that we can determine the actual condition of the patient's mental caliber and his or her relation to life—that is, to her general and special surroundings in this world. It is only thus that we can determine with any accuracy the resistance to evil which each person is likely to offer, and her capability to support and take care of herself in the world. These two factors, power of resistance to evil and capability of self-support, are the most important determining conditions in regard to the status of the patient as regards the community. When these are lacking, the person is not only a pauper, but also a menace. Lack of power of resistance to evil and incapability of self-support are separate conditions; though they are often, indeed usually, co-existent.

Inability to earn one's living in the world means for the poor dependence and possibly pauperism. For girls such as we are considering it also means terrible temptation to immorality. These girls are apt (1) to have immoral tendencies naturally and (2) to be simple, easily led or persuaded to do anything, so that they are the prey of any man. These two conditions may both occur together. If as is rather unusual, neither of these two conditions exist, then the temptation from poverty comes into effect and drives them into evil (sexual evil.) Few of these girls permanently escape, unless they are specially cared for by wise and understanding people. Their care demands unceasing vigilance and constant thought, which can rarely be properly exercised outside of an institution. As a fact, these girls—unless cared for permanently in an institution—usually become immoral or are led away to make bad marriages. In either case their children are apt to be mentally defective, with more or less pronounced animal instincts, diseased and depraved, a curse and menace to the community. This goes on constantly increasing unless we take means (in this case institutional care) to prevent the production of children. The evil that one feeble-minded woman can cause through the production of feeble-minded children is incalculable. These girls do this. Being themselves non-perceiving that this is true; consequently the mere teaching to them of the result of acts. There is a loss of comprehension of the relation of personal acts to the patients themselves, to others, and in general to the future. We speak of moral imbecility, but often moral imbecility means this: that the patient, although theoretically comprehending that one kind of action is called right and another called wrong by her parents, friends or teachers, nevertheless is not herself capable of perceiving that this is true; consequently the mere teaching fails to the ground opposed by circumstances. This lack of comprehension of the relation of things present and future takes away the restraining elements which exist in the normal person and the evil tendency remains unopposed. The force and violence of action of the sexual instinct and the degree in which the restraining motives are unappreciated or absent varies in different cases. The results, however, are in many cases deplorable.

From the standpoint of the patient there is therefore no question that such persons should be properly provided for and protected.

* It is true, however, that to a certain extent the mental faculties are proportionate. In the mental imbecile, so-called, while the lack of morality proportionately far exceeds the intellectual lack, it is nevertheless true that in most and possibly in all cases there is a slight intellectual deficiency. So in regard to practical ability, while this may be proportionately much diminished, the intellectual and moral capacities tend also to be slightly diminished.

From the standpoint of the public the same is true. There is probably no class of persons who are more fitted and more apt to spread disease and moral evil than these girls. We have already referred to the results of child-bearing in them. The children, if they live, are apt to be feeble-minded or otherwise degenerate and as these mothers are prolific and often have several children, the number of defectives thrown upon the care of the state is constantly on the increase. But it is not of this that we wish to speak here. It is the direct spread of disease and moral corruption. One evil girl may corrupt a whole village. One diseased girl may spread disease indefinitely. These girls do this. Being themselves non-resistant, they are the prey of depraved men; they soon become in-
fected and diseased and as they have little moral responsibility and no moral restraint, they spread disease widely.

I now come to the special subject of this paper. These girls must be provided for. As they are paupers or will in some form in most cases come upon the charge of the state, it is wise that the state should care for them. It is wise that the state should care for them early before disease has been spread, irreparable moral harm done to young boys and girls and before more defectives are born to render the burden of the state more intolerable. Morality demands their early care. Business and financial reasons demand it also. It is cheaper to care for one now than for three or four a few years later. The patient whom you neglect to care for at the present time is very liable to come under state care in a few months or years, either as criminal or pauper, and must then be cared for after the evil is done. The evil done through these girls is not simply that which is open and can be seen and calculated. A feeble-minded girl may have had three feeble-minded children, so that the state has had to care for four instead of one: but this is not all. How much effective work has the state lost through the gonorrhoea and syphilis acquired through these girls? This can never be accurately gauged. But every physician experienced in this line will assure you that it is considerable.

This spreading of disease and crime goes on without special intervention to a very serious degree and every effort must be made to check it. Unfortunately, some of our efforts must be turned to prevent its actual increase through the misplaced zeal of some social workers and charitable associations. If these girls—diseased as they often are—are placed in respectable families, there is always a risk (a) that the families may become infected; (b) that the neighborhood may become demoralized. The families with whom these girls are placed are not always warned of the dangers and often do not suspect them. It is not justifiable for a doubtful benefit to one of these girls to risk the physical or moral injury of respectable families.

It is not only the duty of the state from a humanitarian point of view to take charge of these girls early and to keep them in custodial care until the time when they can do evil is past, but as before stated, it is an absolute saving of expense in the end. These girls cannot be left uncared for in the community; neither can they rightfully nor with due regard to themselves and to others be placed in families. Custodial care is the proper treatment and this must be exercised by the state. In exactly what form this can be best done depends upon the special conditions in each state, their methods of caring for paupers, criminals and defectives and the special means at their disposal. These cases should, however, never be treated or cared for as criminals. In the first place, if convicted as criminals they are usually released only to undergo a second