THE STERILIZATION OF CRIMINALS AND OTHER DEFECTIVES BY VASECTOMY.

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The urgent necessity for restricting the procreation of natural criminals and other irresponsible parasites on society, is securing popular recognition. To this end various impotent or impracticable methods have been proposed, and even incorporated into the statutes of several states. Thus Minnesota, Connecticut, Kansas, Michigan and Ohio forbid the marriage of feeble-minded, epileptic and insane women under the age of 45 years. But since marriage is nowhere essential to procreation, least of all among the mentally defective, such laws—even if rigorously enforced—would not efficiently restrain the breeding of irresponsibles. For example, of the thousand criminal, feeble-minded and otherwise defective descendants of the famous Jukes criminal, many were born out of wedlock.

It is obvious that a measure which shall effectively prevent procreation by the mentally defective, must appeal not to their feeble minds but to their bodies; they must be made physically incapable of procreation.

How shall this be accomplished? Three methods have been proposed—castration, colonization, vasectomy.

1. Sterilization of the male criminal by castration, though often discussed, will probably never secure legal sanction, because it destroys the subject's sexual power; for while different men worship different gods, all men worship the same goddess, Venus.

2. Colonization—the confinement of the mentally defective in colonies where access to the other sex should be impossible—has been often suggested as a bar to their propagation, though only by those who have never considered vasectomy. Thus at a recent discussion before the Physicians' Club of Chicago, an eminent speaker advocated colonization for preventing the breeding of human derelicts. When this gentleman's attention was subsequently called to the value of vasectomy to this end, he frankly endorsed it in these words: "This method of arresting the production of criminals is, I am bound to believe, one of the coming blessings to humanity."
3. Vasectomy sterilizes a man without the slightest impairment of his sexual power or pleasure. It merely closes the minute canals through which the fertilizing elements of the male—the spermatozoa—must pass from the testes to the organs which secrete the bulk of the seminal fluid and deposit it in the genital canal of the female. The absence of the spermatozoa from this fluid does not impair the mechanism of erection and ejaculation. This is abundantly proven by the robust sexual health of thousands of men who have been unwittingly sterilized through bilateral epididymitis, and who never suspect that their procreative functions are not perfectly normal until their marriages prove barren; they are potent, but not fertile. That vasectomy itself is equally harmless to sexuality is shown by the experience of those upon whom it has been performed; among these, within my personal knowledge, are married men who chose this means, rather than criminal abortion, to prevent the transmission to offspring of their own hereditary taints, such as insanity and syphilis.

Vasectomy is an office operation; it is performed in a few minutes under cocaine anesthesia, through a skin cut half an inch long; it entails no wound infection, no confinement to bed; it is less serious than the extraction of a tooth.

The prevention of procreation by male defectives through vasectomy is not an iridescent dream. In March, 1907, the Indiana legislature passed a bill authorizing the sterilization of "confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles and rapists" in the state institutions of Indiana. In the prison at Jeffersonville over 800 convicts have been sterilized, some by authority of the state, but over 200 of them at their own request. This voluntary submission to sterilization by hundreds of convicts, removes the only conceivable opposition to this method of protecting society—namely, the sentimental.

In February, 1909, the Oregon legislature passed a duplicate of the Indiana bill, adding a definition of "confirmed criminals" as contained in the bill. This term "shall be deemed to apply to and include all persons serving a third term in any penitentiary or penal institution upon conviction of a felony."

As yet only Indiana and Oregon have actually passed such a law, though the subject has been broached elsewhere. Thus Gov. Sheldon, in his last message to the Nebraska legislature, recommended the consideration of a similar measure; and his successor, Gov. Shellenberger, writes that he will bring this matter before the proper legislative committee.

For obvious reasons this measure seems worthy of national attention. That the unrestrained procreation of their own kind by criminals, feeble-minded and other defectives should cease, is already recognized. But no plan other than vasectomy is both practicable and unobjectionable; and the vasectomy method is still generally unknown. For example, a leading Chicago daily recently discussed editorially the merits and demerits of colonization as a means for restricting the breeding of criminals, but failed to mention the Indiana plan—doubtless because it had never been brought to the editorial attention.

Illinois carefully rears all its defectives—criminals, imbeciles, epileptics, etc.—at the public expense in costly and over multiplying infirmaries—and this is right. But Illinois has never placed the slightest restraint upon propagation by these same defectives, and this is wrong. The average man, so soon as convinced that vasectomy is a trifling operation, and that it does not impair sexual pleasure, heartily approves this method of race suicide for criminals and other defectives, because of the obvious advantages to the community; the sentimentalist, who places unselfish love for the defective above the safety of his own family from burglar and rapist, should be reminded that the greatest kindness that can be shown to the as yet unbegotten offspring of the feeble-minded of all kinds, is to help them to remain unbegotten.

It would seem that our profession can in no other way render a greater service to the community with less effort, than by educating the public to an understanding of the sterilization by vasectomy of confirmed criminals and other defectives. This we can do individually and collectively. An official recommendation of the Indiana law by county and state societies to their respective legislatures might help some; but influential laymen who will buttonhole their respective legislative representatives, and insist that such a bill must be passed, will accomplish far more.

A copy of the Indiana bill adopted two years ago, is appended:

"Preamble—Whereas, Heredity plays a most important part in the transmission of crime, idiocy and imbecility:

Therefore, Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Indiana that on and after the passage of this act it shall be compulsory for each and every institution in the state, entrusted with the care of confirmed criminals, idiots, rapists and imbeciles, to appoint upon its staff, in addition to the regular institutional physician,
two (2) skilled surgeons of recognized ability, whose duty it shall be, in conjunction with the chief physician of the institution, to examine the mental and physical condition of such inmates as are recommended by the institutional physician and board of managers. If, in the judgment of this committee of experts and the board of managers, procreation is inadvisable and there is no probability of improvement of the mental condition of the inmate, it shall be lawful for the surgeons to perform such operation for the prevention of procreation as shall be decided safest and most effective. But this operation shall not be performed except in cases that have been pronounced unimprovable: Provided, That in no case shall the consultation fee be more than three ($3.00) dollars to each expert, to be paid out of the funds appropriated for the maintenance of such institution."

This Indiana law has been recommended for public consideration by the directors of the Chicago Physicians' Club, and of the Chicago Society of Social Hygiene.

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