Some Border-Line Cases of Mental Deficiency

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SOME BORDER-LINE CASES OF MENTAL DEFICIENCY.*

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I feel greatly honored by being asked to report to this society some of the border-line cases of mental deficiency which have come under my observation at the Lancaster State Industrial School for Girls.

Some of the cases which I have selected to report have been transferred to the School for the Feeble-Minded at Waverley. Others are still at the Lancaster School. With part of the latter I do not know what it is best to do; they are not suitable cases to be kept at the school, they do not do well if allowed to go out. Should they be sent to the School for the Feeble-Minded, or do they belong in some other institution?

There are three questions which are constantly arising:

First, What is the highest grade of mental deficiency which shall be committed to the School for the Feeble-Minded?

Second, What shall be done with the others, if there are others, who need indefinite custodial care, after they are twenty-one, on account of some mental deficiency, or for other reasons?

Third, What is to be considered a failure in those who are allowed to go out into the world?

From a talk with the Judge of Probate before whom the girls at the Lancaster School have to be taken to be committed to the School for the Feeble-

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Minded, I understood that he would be willing to act in the following cases:

First, those who, owing to their mental inferiority, are incapable of taking care of their person. Second, those who, owing to their mental inferiority, are dangerous to others, that is, are liable to injure them physically, and those who are destructive to property. Third, those who, owing to their mental inferiority, are incapable of self-direction, provided they have no responsible person to have charge of them outside, including those who are liable to become the prey of vicious men owing to their mental deficiency.

Each case must be acted upon separately, and there must be unmistakable evidence of feeblemindedness. A girl to be committed as feebleminded must be of as low a grade as a boy. A judge is not obliged to commit every feebleminded person brought before him. He goes into each case thoroughly, and if the parents object, he would think it best for the child to be left in their charge provided he considers them responsible and the condition of the home favorable.

A girl as a rule is brought to the Lancaster School between eleven and seventeen years of age. She comes from a poor, ignorant family of foreign extraction, she has been brought up among the worst surroundings, she is in the second, third or possibly the fifth grade in school, she has little knowledge of the rights of others and has vicious tendencies, her powers of observation and reasoning are limited, she can do very little work and her attention is not held for any length of time. Under the influence of the discipline and instruction which she receives, her mental powers develop more or less rapidly for a time, but sooner or later she seems to have reached the limit of her possibilities, and all further advance ceases. She can now do considerable work,—she can make good bread, can wash and iron well, perhaps she is able to make a simple dress, but it is found that as soon as supervision is withdrawn, her work deteriorates. If put out into a family where she is not under close supervision and strict discipline, her work becomes less satisfactory and she shows lawless tendencies. Mentally she is still below the average but not as low grade as when she came to the school.

There are cases of this kind continually coming under my observation. They come to the school poorly endowed mentally, and what possibilities they may have, have never been given a chance to develop. Some seem to compare favorably with their parents, but their judgment cannot be relied upon and they are easily influenced by others. While at the school they are so protected that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how much their morals have improved.

In the reports of the following cases I have copied freely from the records at the office, have used reports from the officers at the different houses and notes taken from my own observation.

CASE I. C. U. Born April, 1890, committed August, 1906, as a stubborn child; on admission was found to be pregnant and in a poor physical condition. She was confined the last of December, and the following February was placed out in a family with the child. She was very fond of her child, but could not be trusted to take care of it as she lacked judgment. While out she was secretly married to the hired man employed in the family because she thought her child was going to be taken away from her, and she had been told that if she was married the authorities could not take it. She was returned to the school and since her return she has developed in all ways. She has made herself very useful in the house, especially so in sewing, has charge of the sewing room and has shown herself
quite responsible. She is of good disposition, placid, willing and ambitious. From the first she gave evidence of feeble mentality, and although she has improved a great deal, she is still below the average. In her school work she is in third grade.

Case II. K. Q. For the first two or three months she was a desperate case. From the first day of commitment she began a series of sensational maneuvers, noisy in her room, screaming and pounding, quarrelsome with the other girls, would eat only on the sly, would arrange her dress and hair in the most fantastic style and work her face into all sorts of contortions; she was filthy in her room.

Her performances continued for several months, a few days of silence, alternating with bolderness, followed by great hilarity. She apparently had delusions, would say the girls were choking her; she had an uncontrollable temper, and threatened the lives of other girls on different occasions. As she became more interested in the different enterprises of the school, she gradually subsided and has become more and more normal. She is a splendid worker, especially fond of kitchen work, and has seemed to acquire quite a degree of responsibility; has for months assisted in the kitchen at the hospital, where she has made herself very valuable. She is neat to the last degree, methodical and most of the time good natured, always ready with a quick answer. Has a great love of commendation and is very affectionate. She can read and write intelligently, add and subtract, is ambitious to learn. She is greatly influenced by her surroundings, her face portraying every passing thought,—at times sulen and sad, again bright and alert, ready for anything which may come along.

Case III. G. P. Born April, 1892. Was first taken by the State Board of Charities as an unmanageable child; came to the Lancaster School in April, 1904. Since then has been boarded out and allowed to go home, but in every place was so difficult to get along with no one would keep her; was out late nights, at times all night, and stole repeatedly. At the school has always been unruly and disobedient, at times noisy in her room. After being transferred to another house she behaved very well for six months, could be taught to do most things, could sew well. Last winter she began to give a great deal of trouble; during January she had two marks, in February twenty-four and in March thirty-three. In a talk with the matron of the house, the first of April, she said she had behaved badly because one of the girls told her it was the only way to get out; that if she made trouble enough she would be sent to some other institution from which she would soon be discharged. During April she behaved very well, but May has been a bad month, beginning with a slight attack about the first; this was followed in a few days by one of the worst she has had, that in a short time by a third. At the beginning of an attack she is said to laugh in an unnatural way, pointing her finger at some girl saying, “Bad, bad.” Is disagreeable and refuses to mind. The girls are said to recognize that an attack is on, and often try to talk her out of it, but to no effect. She is sent to her room, where she makes considerable noise, breaks and destroys things. At times force has to be used. She twisted the matron’s hand so that the wrist was sprained and slapped her in the face during a recent fracas. She is taken to a room in the basement where, after several days solitary confinement,—once refusing all food and drink for days,—she becomes suitable for family life again.

I saw the room after a recent attack—a tin plate torn into strips, a wash basin jammed out of shape, a dress torn into shreds and a heavy wooden crosspiece broken from a bench, the only piece of furniture in the room. The bolt which held one end was also broken. She is said to look and act like an insane person when struggling. She has not had any hallucinations or delusions; she is able to reason, remembers everything that occurs, and can give a reason for acting as she does. Wants to be sent to an insane hospital, to prison or the Feeble-Minded School—anywhere to get out of her present place. Again she wants to make it so disagreeable that the matron will resign. There are no
ideas of persecution, although at times she thinks she is punished more severely than the other girls. The priest is reported as saying that she is incorrigible, that he could not get any sense from her. She is mentally below the average, is in the third grade in school work, and likes to play with dolls.

Case IV. J. W. Born May, 1891. Committed July, 1907, for drunkenness; had been arrested and put on probation three times previous to this. Her associates were immoral. When admitted to the school, she was in a curious condition for two weeks or more, which was thought to be the result of her intemperance. She would cry out as if some one was hurting her, then call for her mother to come and get her. There was considerable muscular twitching. She hardly seemed to realize when spoken to, but persistent questioning would obtain an apparently intelligent answer, which would be given in a quick but sullen manner. She was in an extremely nervous, irritable condition, which still persists, but in a much less marked degree. She still has some choreic twitchings. I cannot determine that there ever were any hallucinations, but she will not talk freely with me. At home she was never made to mind, others did as she wanted. Her chief characteristic is "I won't." She will not do anything that is wanted of her, and she wants to do everything that is not wanted. At times will not eat if she thinks the others want her to. The other girls get her to run away when out by telling her that she must not. She will not do anything except through fear; for a few days at a time they can get along with her comfortably by being extremely careful. She is in the third grade in school work, can write a very good letter, but usually spoils it by putting in some absurd thing. At times makes some very bright remarks. She will not apply herself, and is not useful in the house, enjoys hectoring the other girls, pulled one girl's hair very severely. At best she is a nuisance.

Case V. H. M. Born January, 1891. Committed to the school July, 1903, for stubbornness, stealing and vicious habits. She had been in charge of the State Board of Charity for some time previous to this. Was first placed out September, 1905. January, 1906, a good report was received from her. She was said to be growing fast and doing well in school work. February, 1907, was returned to the school as unsatisfactory. Oct. 10, 1907, was again placed out. Oct. 30 and Nov. 3, her places were changed; Nov. 12, 1907, she was returned to the school. In the first place she proved to be incompetent, ruining everything she touched. In the second place she was saucy, untruthful and freakish in her likes and dislikes. In the third place she was very low minded, "a regular little animal," talked horribly to an old man in the family, added stealing to her list of misdemeanors.

At the school she did very well for the first few months; since then has caused a great deal of trouble, disagreeable, saucy, ugly, vicious, shiftless, refused to work, pretended for a long time that she could not, threatened to set fire to the buildings. At present she is doing very well. Is classed as being in the seventh grade in school work.

Case VI. A. C. Born February, 1891. Committed to the school August, 1904, as lewd, wanton and lascivious. Was not considered as under average in intellect. September, 1904, was allowed to go home and marry a man living in the house with her father. April, 1905, is reported as being very happy and trying to save money enough to buy a house. January, 1906, was returned to the school because she would not stay at home, and would not do the housework, out walking the streets until late at night. She is said to have had improper relations with her father and probably with an uncle. It is reported that her father wanted to swap her mother for her with her husband, but I do not know that these statements are true. She is said to have been very uncivilized when she first came to the school. She has improved a great deal and does not give much trouble now, is kind hearted, and as a scrub girl, useful, but needs strict supervision. Has not much idea of right and wrong, both the result of her bringing up and mental deficiency. In school work is in the third grade.
CASE VII. A. S. Born May, 1892. Committed to
the school February, 1907, for larceny. Was thought to
be pregnant and a place was found for her outside where
she behaved very badly; was in three different places.
Later it was found that she was not pregnant and she
was returned to the school. Two days later the bars
and casings to her window were found loose and she was
sent to another house. The matron at the latter house
reports that there is not a worse girl in the house;
that there is not a dirty thing going on but she is in it,
that she is so easily influenced, the other girls put her
up to do things to bother the officers. She is quiet and
sly, is very submissive, nothing will arouse her temper.
She is learning to sew very well, can clean house, but is
extremely slow. In school work is in the fifth grade.
It is thought at present that she could not do enough to
earn her own living and that she would become a prey
for the first person who came along.

CASE VIII. A. K. Parents died when she was four
years old; has been in charge of the state since. Now
an intense, shrewd, keen girl of eighteen years. Is in
the fifth grade in school work. Is apparently trying
to do right and wants to win approval, but has not the
patience to do her work well, is in a hurry to get one
thing done and begin another. Is strongly attracted
by nice and pretty things, which she cannot seem to
resist taking; if clothing, she wears part, cuts up and
destroys more and perhaps gives away the remaining.

THE HIGH-GRADE MENTAL DEFECTIVES.*

BY W. N. BULLARD, M.D., BOSTON.

As the careful and scientific clinical study of the
various dependent classes advances, and as our
knowledge increases and becomes more definite,
grades and forms of mental development and of
mental power can be more clearly distinguished
and we can with greater certainty determine the
true mental condition of those whom we are
called upon to examine and observe. As we
approach the higher degrees of mental impair­
ment the difficulties in the classification and
grading of the mental capacity or the normality
of the brain action becomes enormously increased.
By the term “higher degree of mental impairment”
we denote those cases in which the defect is least
apparent, the so-called border-line cases — those
cases which are supposed to stand near or close to
the imaginary line which divides the normal
from the subnormal or diseased. We shall
certainly not in our time be able to measure with
absolute accuracy the brain powers of any person.
And yet by most careful study and by most in­
genious devices we are able to form definite con­
cclusions in regard to many cases which a few
years ago were neither properly distinguished nor
differentiated. It is very easy even for the lay­
man to perceive that the low-grade idiot is not
normal. The ordinary forms of feeble-minded­
ness and idiocy seen at our clinics are commonly

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recognizable without difficulty by any physician who has paid attention to this subject. But the higher grades of feeble-mindedness rarely come to the specialist or neurological clinics, and when they come cannot be recognized. The reason for this is obvious. These cases cannot be classified without full mental histories. The physical examination is worthless in this regard. Long mental histories and prolonged observation can alone afford the requisite data. This class of cases can best be studied in connection with some society or institution where detailed histories of the patients for a number of years are available and where there is a certain amount of practiced or trained observation.

One great difficulty in the classification and grading of these cases is, that even the experts have not sufficiently realized the inequality of natural and of pathological mental development. The layman has hardly accepted the idea at all, but it is gradually being comprehended that because a child is or is thought to be fond of music, it is not a sign that he is not feeble-minded. But even among the physicians and even among the specialists (the alienists and neurologists) this fact has not received sufficient weight. We know that in ordinary life the brain or the mental powers are not usually developed equally in all directions, but we have not applied this fact with sufficient clearness in our study of the higher grades of mental defect. We are still prone to consider that the child who can get through the school examination, or the adult who can read and write fairly well, is not feeble-minded, and yet there is a large class which can fulfill these tests and yet are not able to care for themselves in the world, are in the true sense of the word feeble-minded, and form perhaps the most dan-

erous class and certainly the most expensive class to the community.

It is only in a modified way that intellectual ability can be accepted as a satisfactory test for the mental powers. There are other mental qualities which have a large part in the sum of mental characteristics, qualitative and quantitative, which make up the mentality of the normal child.

To mention only a few of these: There is first the moral sense. We have heard but a few weeks ago from Dr. Fernald in relation to this class of cases. Of those under his observation he has been able to satisfy himself that all or nearly all have also definite intellectual defect, while the moral defect is the prominent or predominant symptom. It is my opinion, however, that the greatest caution should be exercised in placing cases in this category.

Secondly, we find a number of persons (girls) who are only slightly weak in power of intellectual acquisition; that is, they can learn a good deal, but they are wholly lacking in practical judgment. They cannot care for themselves in the world because they do not thoroughly comprehend, and on account of mental incapacity cannot be made to comprehend, the ordinary relations of practical things. Their conduct is not regulated and naturally is apt to be bad, not because moral sense is lacking, though this may be also the case, but because they cannot appreciate the bearing of one act upon another and are led irresponsibly they know not where.

Thirdly there is another class whose difficulty seems to be lack of self-control. They are more or less weak intellectually, but this weakness is not their prominent mental symptom. As one meets them casually they seem at first like ordinary persons, not very strong intellectually though not
really much below par, yet it is soon found that they have no power of resistance. They are led away by any one in any direction and they are unable to care for themselves in the world on account of this mental defect and are naturally drawn to evil.

I must here state very clearly my belief that it is only in carefully observed cases where some definite intellectual defect exists that we are justified in making a diagnosis of mental irresponsibility. I feel strongly the great danger which exists to society in pushing too far the idea of moral insanity in criminals, and I am opposed to its use unless in very exceptional cases. I think that great care also should be used in diagnosticating a case as one of moral imbecility. Yet these latter cases undoubtedly exist and some are very obvious, while others require the most detailed, prolonged and judicial observation before their exact character can be decided. It is only the expert, and the expert in imbecility, not insanity alone, who is fitted to give judgment in these cases.

This applies with equal force to those cases in which lack of self-control or of decision seems to be the predominant factor. To determine whether this lack is really due to defective cerebral development or to lack of early training or to what extent it is due to each of these causes will test to a high degree the judgment and the ability of the expert in imbecility. No expert, however skillful he may be, can make this decision without serious and usually lengthy study of the case. To bring such a case to a physician's office and to expect a decision on the spot shows ignorance of the real inherent difficulties and is not to be countenanced from the standpoint either of the patient or the physician.

I do not think that it will be necessary for me before this society to prove the existence of these classes of high mental defectives of whom I have spoken. Such proof would be only too easy. Case after case can be related and shown in which the existence of this condition has been evident to all the experts who have watched and examined the patient.

Rather is it our aim to discuss what shall be done for this class of patient. I shall consider for the moment only the females, the girls and women, as for evident reasons it is most pressing for them.

Girls of the classes described, whether coming from the state school or elsewhere, must be properly provided for and cared for by the state. The reasons for this are: (1) There is no class of persons in our whole population who, unit for unit, are so dangerous or so expensive to the state; this excepts no class, not even the violently insane. These girls are much more dangerous and expensive than the ordinary insane or the ordinary feeble-minded or the ordinary male criminal.

Why is this? They are dangerous because, being irresponsible wholly or in part, they become the prey of the lower class of vile men and are the most fertile source for the spread of all forms of venereal disease. They have not the sense nor the understanding to avoid disease nor any care as to its spread.

They are most expensive to the state because they are the most fruitful source of diseased and mentally-defective children, who are apt to become state charges. One woman of this class, slightly below par intellectually, but not extremely feeble-minded, can produce incalculable evil. The plainly feeble-minded is more or less obvious and
the evil she creates is so plain that it can be and often is guarded against, but with the high-grade imbecile this is not the case. Married or unmarried, they are liable to produce diseased, rotten and defective children.

I could say much more on this subject, but before this audience I am sure it is not needed. I shall simply state again the proposition: The high-grade female mental defective must be provided for by the state and this class should be fully provided for as soon as possible.

How they should be provided for I cannot here discuss. This problem properly comes under the jurisdiction of the state authorities, especially the State Board of Insanity. None realizes better than I do the difficulties in the way of provision for this class. To demand that the state take care of even a moderate number of high-grade female imbeciles through the whole period of their active sexual life, while we admit that these patients are not intellectually essentially improvable, but that they need custodial care, that they are not an easy class to satisfy, and that their relatives and parents, many of whom are themselves either addicted to alcohol or other evil or vice and are of low mental grade, are liable to cause any trouble they can to the institutions receiving them, seems almost as if we were requiring too much. And yet it is not so. Our requirements are moderate and, judicially considered, eminently reasonable. It is but a sign of financial wisdom to pay two dollars now to avoid paying a hundred dollars in a few years. It would be wise without consideration of the financial question to pay well now simply to avoid the public spread of foul disease. There is almost no one who would not wish to stop the spread of smallpox in the community, yet syphilis is much worse on the whole than smallpox.

What can be done with these persons now? A certain number are received at the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded at Waverley. Elsewhere there is at present no place for them.

It is said that we are going to meet with legal difficulties in the commitment of these patients. I do not believe that these will be permanent or fixed. As soon as the judges are sufficiently instructed in the inability of these persons to care for themselves in the world and that this inability is due to mental defect, they will undoubtedly act humanely and reasonably, as much as there is no law to prevent them from so doing.

The descriptive paper now in use for commitment to the State School for the Feeble-Minded at Waverley should be changed. It is totally inadequate and inapplicable to this class of cases. It reads: "(She) is not insane but is so deficient in mental ability that (she) cannot be taught in common schools as others of (her) age are." These high-grade female imbeciles are most of them beyond school age; some of them can be taught, at least partially, as others of their age are, and, thirdly, it is not properly a matter of primary importance in this class whether they can be taught or not. The real question is their mental incapacity, due to mental or cerebral defect, to live an ordinary life in the world as "others of their age" do. This class, owing to mental defect, cannot guide or guard itself in ordinary life, and is a menace to the state.