

SOCIAL MEDICINE OF OLD AGE

THE Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation have published a report on the social medicine of old age prepared by Dr. J. H. Sheldon in a survey of a random sample of 477 old people*. His object was "to discover the medical and mental condition of old people living at home, and the stresses and strains to which both they and the younger people caring for them may be subject". The survey forms an appendix to the report entitled "Old Age", published by a Survey Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Seeborn Rowntree. Wolverhampton was one of the towns covered by the Rowntree Report, and the same sample of people has provided the material for the new survey. The town, which has a population of 150,000, was selected because it was large enough to ensure a fair mixture of all income classes and sufficiently compact to enable the compiler to undertake the amount of visiting involved. Old age for the purposes of the survey has been taken to begin at sixty for women and sixty-five for men. The sample was obtained from the register of ration cards, every thirtieth name in the selected age group being included in the survey.

The earlier chapters of the report deal with what the author describes as the natural history of old age, and cover an assessment of the old person's health, ability to move about, the nature and extent of any illness, susceptibility to loneliness, extent of dependence on others for nursing care, shopping, housework and cooking, difficulties in climbing stairs, queueing, moving among traffic or in the dark and liability to fall. The analysis of the physical state of the subjects was based on a case-history supplied by the subjects themselves and by relatives, or in some cases by their general practitioners. No clinical examination of the subjects was possible, and for this reason the data permit no very accurate estimate of the nature of any existing disability. In particular, no precise evaluation can be made of the diseases and functional impairments which are specific to old age, or of the contributory factors involved in the phenomenon of senescence. The remainder of the report makes a valuable analysis of the ecology of old age; that is, its relation with the rest of the community, and the mutual stresses and strains set up.

One of the important points which emerges is the fundamental importance of the family in the social biology of old age. The problems of old people in the mass are domestic rather than institutional. The author favours the provision of temporary hostel accommodation which would enable those normally responsible for their care to obtain occasional relief. Another aspect which is referred to is the provision of old people's dwellings specially designed and carefully sited in building schemes of the future. The possibility of living in the environment to which they are accustomed, of having something to do, and of being still able to feel necessary to the world are of the greatest importance to old people, and may help to explain why the mental level of old people living in their homes appears to be so much better than that of those living in institutions. The sense of loneliness of old people and the disabilities which are inherent in old age are most successfully mitigated where children or relatives live in close proximity.

* The Social Medicine of Old Age: Report of an Inquiry in Wolverhampton. By Dr. J. H. Sheldon. (Survey Committee on the Problems of Ageing and the Care of Old People: Medical Subcommittee on the Causes and Results of Ageing.) (Published for the Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation.) Pp. x+240. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948.) 5s. net.

This mode of life seems most satisfactory to both generations since it enables the old people to preserve their independence and the married children to live a separate life, while at the same time ensuring that help is at hand in time of need. There is, however, a darker side to the picture. Many old people, especially women, were found to be carrying a burden in the management of the home, and in some cases in the nursing of a sick husband, which was clearly beyond their capacity. In other cases the care of aged parents imposes a strain on the younger generation which is almost intolerable.

The findings of the report are not necessarily applicable to other towns, and no final conclusions can be drawn from the data which have been obtained. Nevertheless, the report is of value in directing attention to the kind of problems which beset old age and in indicating some of the ways in which these problems can be met. In a population such as that of Great Britain, where the age distribution is moving upwards, there is a clear need for further study of old age.

RECENT RESEARCHES ON FOOD

THE first report of the Food Investigation Board since 1938 has only recently appeared*; but readers of scientific journals have been able to follow the work that has been done through the publication of separate papers on particular aspects of the work. The public in general has had a close acquaintance with the results of the work—if not of the work itself—in the war-time dehydrated foods and the special packagings that were adopted. Probably, however, few of those who complained about their dried egg and their household milk realized the amount of work that had gone into making it possible for us to have these foods at all. Here now is a chance for them to learn something of what was done on their behalf, for the successful application of the research findings was the result of close co-operation between the Board and the Ministry of Food.

The present report includes a summary of the work done during the years 1940-45 and a more detailed report for 1946, when the urgency of the war years had lessened and it was possible to resume "a more balanced and diversified programme of research which includes a fair proportion of longer range and more fundamental studies". This year also saw the reopening of the two 'market' laboratories, at Smithfield and at Covent Garden. The Torry Fisheries Research Station had been active throughout.

During the war years problems connected with the dehydration of foodstuffs and their subsequent use took first place—of necessity, since smallness of bulk was of particular importance in transport and storage. Now, however, there is opportunity once again to study such matters as the ripening and storage of fresh fruit and vegetables, the smoking and salting of fresh fish, freezing techniques and the composition of fresh carcasses.

The work of the Food Investigation Board covers a multitude of problems arising from the processing, packaging, transport and storage of foodstuffs. Already we are a far cry from the primitive producer-consumer community whose diet is subject to very marked seasonal variations and shortages. All the work

* Food Investigation, 1940-46. Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. Pp. 42. (London: H.M.S.O., 1948.)