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THE TEETH OF OUR CHILDREN

(A PLEA FOR THEIR BETTER CARE AND PRESERVATION).

Laid on the Table of the House by Leave.

A PAPER read before the Dental Conference, at Wellington, on Wednesday, the 7th June, 1905. By
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PREFACE.

WHEN I was invited to read a paper on the teeth of children before the first meeting of the Dental Conference I was peculiarly gratified at the subject selected for me. It is a subject the surpassing importance of which, in its relation to the public health, cannot be exaggerated. The teeth of, I venture to say, 98 per cent. of our children do not receive the care they deserve. The result is that already early in life, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the apparatus provided by nature for the proper performance of one of the most, if not the most, important of all physiological functions is sadly impaired. The processes of nature are evolutionary, not revolutionary, in character, and the evil effects of neglect in any given direction may not be visible in a day; nevertheless, I have no hesitation in asserting that defective teeth and an unclean condition of the mouth, which is the common thing, instead of the rare exception, are amongst the most potent of the causes which are making for that physical and moral degeneration of the race, signs of which are even now engaging the attention of the more thoughtful among us. To my mind, let me add by way of warning, it is evidence of shallow and immature thought to suppose that evolution necessarily spells progress and improvement. I can conceive circumstances under which it may mean ruin. History furnishes us with more than one instance of progressive degeneration. I do not suppose that any measures man can devise will solve the problem of eternal life for the body politic, any more than it is possible to make a mortal immortal. But, just as Tennyson was able to exclaim,

Yet I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns.

so, I think, is it possible to lengthen, as we go on, the span of our historic cycles. By adopting precautions where precautions are needed, by improving where improvement is required, by holding neglect—the arch-enemy of mankind—at arm's length, we can, I doubt not, retard degeneration and fulfil the “increasing purpose” of which Tennyson speaks.

The facts and opinions of leading authorities, which I have been able to collect and quote in the following paper, will, I hope, convince the most sceptical that one of the most important of the ways in which we can preserve the national health and vigour, in body and in mind, is by proper attention to the teeth of our children. I hope, too, that I shall have succeeded in convincing them that Governmental interference in the shape of legislation in the direction indicated in the paper is urgently necessary to check the present deplorable conditions. I have not overloaded my paper with statistics. I might, indeed, have multiplied these indefinitely. I think, however, that a few judiciously selected from unimpeachable sources are capable of affording an accurate idea of the real situation, quite as much as wearisome pages and columns of figures, which are only intelligible to an expert statistician.

In conclusion, I would add that the care of the teeth of children is a subject to which I have given long and earnest thought and attention, and one on which I feel very deeply. If this paper succeeds in bringing home to the public mind, in ever so little a degree, the vital importance and solemnity of the question, I shall have been more than repaid for the time and trouble its preparation has cost me.