

When the special school at Otekaike, near Oamaru, was established the Department was besieged with applications for the admission of children who for the most part proved to be of the low-grade type, and owing to absence of any other method of providing for such cases the Department was obliged in many instances to admit these low-grade cases in the interests of common humanity, and in order to relieve the strain on already overburdened mothers. As a rule the lower class of idiot, the majority of them with disagreeable habits, often deformed and misshapen or partially paralyzed, cannot be given suitable care in their own homes. Probably there is no greater burden possible in a home. Humanity and public policy demand that families should be relieved of the burden of helpless idiots. As nearly every low-grade idiot eventually becomes a public burden, it is better to assume their care when they are young and susceptible of a certain amount of training, than to receive them later on as undisciplined, helpless, destructive adult idiots. But the matter of providing for these unfortunates should not fall on the Education Department.

In comparatively few cases has the Department been able to prevail upon parents to send the children belonging to the higher grades of mental defect to special schools, although as a class these children are a far greater social danger to the community than the lower-grade types. The brighter classes of the feeble-minded with their weak will-power and deficient judgment are easily influenced for evil, and are prone to become vagrants, drunkards, and thieves. The modern scientific study of the dependent and delinquent classes as a whole has demonstrated that a large proportion of our criminals, inebriates, and prostitutes are really congenital defectives who have been allowed to grow up without any attempt being made to improve or discipline them. Society suffers the penalty of this neglect in an increase of pauperism and vice, and finally at greatly increased cost is compelled to take charge of adult idiots in mental hospitals, and of mentally defective criminals in prisons generally, off and on during the remainder of their lives. As a matter of mere economy it is better and cheaper for the community to assume the permanent custody of such persons before they have carried out a long career of expensive crime.

The tendency to lead dissolute lives is especially noticeable in the females. A feeble-minded girl is exposed as no other girl in the world is exposed. She has not sense enough to protect herself from the perils to which women are subjected. Often amiable in disposition and physically attractive, they either marry and bring forth a new generation of defectives, or they become irresponsible sources of corruption and debauchery in the communities where they live. There is every reason in the interests of morality, humanity, and public policy that feeble-minded women should be under permanent and watchful guardianship, especially during the child-bearing age.

From the industrial-schools records I have selected the following cases which will prove that if only from a business point of view it will pay the State to provide for the proper supervision, and, if need be, segregation, of the feeble-minded. No doubt similar information could be obtained from the records of the Mental Hospitals and Prisons Departments, and from the records of any of the Hospital and Charitable Aid Boards.

Case No. 1 is that of a feeble-minded woman. In 1902 she gave birth to an illegitimate child, who in 1908 was committed to a receiving-home (an industrial school). This child was found to be mentally deficient, and subsequently was admitted to a special school for feeble-minded girls. She will be a lifelong charge on the State, and, assuming that she survives to the age of thirty-five years, the cost of her maintenance will be approximately £1,050.

Subsequently the mother married a man, also feeble-minded and physically a weakling. The result of the union is as follows: A, born 1904; B, born 1906; C, born 1907. All these boys were committed to one of our receiving-homes in 1911, having been found by the police in a dirty, uncared-for condition, and upon examination all were found to be feeble-minded. Two have since been committed to mental hospitals, and the third has been sent to a special school for feeble-minded boys. All are custodial cases, and will have to be kept in institutions during their lifetime. The cost will be approximately £5,196.

Last year the following additional members of the family were committed to the same receiving-home: D, born 1910 (described as a mental defective); E, born 1912 (tubercular and mentally deficient); F, born 1914 (tubercular and mentally deficient); G, born 1916 (mentally deficient, deaf-and-dumb, and suffering from rickets); H, born 1918 (suffering from rickets, backward in development, mentally deficient). All these children will be lifelong charges on the State, and their maintenance in institutions will cost approximately £7,800.

I am not in a position to state what has already been expended by the local Hospital and Charitable Aid Board and by sundry local benevolent societies in providing the necessities of life for the parents and the children while in their own home, but from the foregoing figures it is safe to estimate that the members of this family up to the present will cost the Government not less than £14,046.

In the meantime the parents have been freed of their responsibilities, and there is no reason to doubt but that if allowed to remain at large they will bring more children into the world for the State to look after.

Both this man and his wife are cases for segregation, but at the present time the only Government institution to which they could be admitted is a mental hospital, and I am very doubtful whether any two medical men would certify that they are suitable cases for such an institution.

Case No. 2: A runaway foreign sailor married a feeble-minded girl. The result of the union so far is as follows: A, born 1900 (feeble-minded—a case for lifelong custody in an institution; committed to an industrial school in 1917 and later sent on to the Special School at Otekaike); B, born 1902 (quite normal—a nice well-behaved boy); C, born 1904 (quite normal—staying with neighbours); D, born 1905 (feeble-minded—a case for lifelong control; at present at Special School, Otekaike); E, born 1908 (feeble-minded and suffering from phthisis—case for consumption sanatorium as well as for custodial care); F, born in 1911 (doubtful mentality—under industrial-school control); G, born in 1914 (possibly normal, but very delicate—in the hands of friends); H, born in 1915 (normal, but probably backward).

In this case it is difficult to assess the cost of providing for the family. The father is a decent man, but gives way to drink and is often out of employment. The mother is feeble-minded, shiftless, a