

"THE MORALE VITAMIN"

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. MURIEL BELL, Nutritionist to the Department of Health)

I REMEMBER some years ago an article on cancer in the British Medical Journal which began "All writers on cancer commence by saying that no one knows what is the cause of cancer. The writer having thus doffed his bonnet, then allows his own particular bee to take its flight." Now I hope that in this series you will not point a finger to the forehead. It really is not that sort of B.

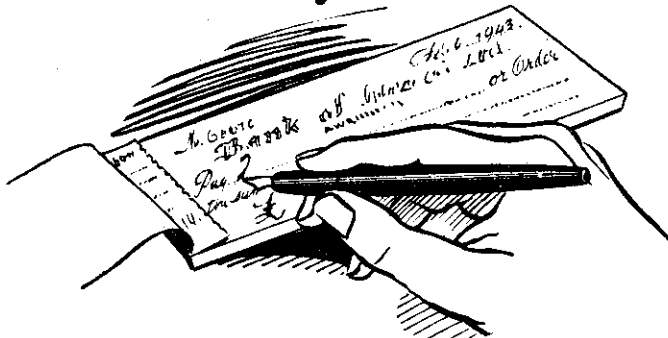
The story of observations on foods in relation to vitamin B1 goes back a long way. One milestone was passed when Eijkman in 1890 first noticed that some fowls fed on polished rice could not stand up straight, but that if they had rice bran added to their food they recovered. This resembled beri-beri in human beings, a disease in which the obvious symptoms were paralysis of the arms and legs. This led to the overthrow of the old medical theory that the disease was caused by germs or toxins. In fact, a new and revolutionary concept arose in medicine that disease could be caused by lack of something. The result is that beri-beri has disappeared as a major cause of death in many areas in which it was formerly endemic. Beri-beri is a form of neuritis. We rarely see it in New Zealand; and if a case does come into our hospital wards the suspicion that the victim is attempting to live by beer alone is immediately aroused. There is only a trace of vitamin B1 in beer. By far the majority of it has gone into the brewery yeast.

Latterly there have been a number of experiments done on human beings to try to establish how much vitamin B1 we need for optimum health. Bound up with this is a still newer concept in medicine, not "what diseases this will prevent," but "how we may enjoy abounding health."

It is really too early to say whether the results of these experiments will stand the test of time. They have been done on too few persons as yet. Indeed it may be many decades before we really have information of which we can be sure. The sort of thing that has been reported to date is that when foods containing an optimum amount of vitamin B1 are given, there is increased ability to resist fatigue of muscles, to perform psychological tests, and to tackle jobs; also in certain people removal of a feeling of mental depression or of what has often been labelled neurasthenia. It is on the strength of experiments such as these that the Americans have designated vitamin B1 (or thiamin, as we now call it) the "morale vitamin"—perhaps a useful catch-cry in war time, even if the designation is somewhat premature.

Well, if we have to wait until this thing is proved by medical science, we may be missing that abounding health which perhaps we shall achieve when we know more. At any rate it is known that larger amounts are needed at special times such as pregnancy, lactation, growth, and during fevers. So meantime we need to know what foods will give us a good supply of thiamin. A list will follow in the next article.

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