

FRIENDLY FLORA

*In Association With
Little Mary*

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

SIR ARBUTHNOT LANE at one time was very keen on removing a considerable portion of the large intestine because of the numbers of bacteria that are present in it. There are many who are still disturbed by the thought that bacterial toxins may be produced there. They are evidently unaware of the great power of the liver to deal with any toxins of non-virulent organisms provided that it is supplied with enough of the right foodstuffs to use for this purpose. Nearly all of the blood coming from the intestines goes to the liver, which changes harmful chemical substances into innocuous ones. Theories about "auto intoxication" as it has been called, have thus not received support from experimental evidence.

Latterly we have had to take account of a new point of view—the fact that the bacterial flora in our intestines are even useful in some ways. They have the ability to contribute vitamin K, one of the substances which assist in making the conditions right for the blood to clot when a wound is inflicted.

A new item is the fact that our intestinal flora are capable of contributing some vitamin B1. A number of human volunteers were given diets deficient in vitamin B1. Some developed beri beri, while the others failed to do so. It was proved that the latter were benefiting from the activity of the bacteria present in their intestine.

We have to understand that a useful symbiosis exists between animals and the bacterial inhabitants of their intestines. Thus, the presence of certain vitamins in the food stimulates the growth of micro-organisms in the digestive tract, and then in their turn certain of these micro-organisms can synthesise additional vitamins. If one of the sulpha drugs which prevents growth of organisms in the intestine, is given to rats, even though the rats are getting their full quota of vitamin B factors, they fail to grow properly. This illustrates the type of balance that exists between the animal organism and its normal bacterial friends. It shows, too, that we cannot just go without our vitamins and leave it all to our friendly flora to manufacture them. Sometimes there are inimical bacterial inhabitants also, so we still have to keep alive to the requirements for personal and public health.

A similar state of symbiosis exists between the soil bacteria and the plants. Even earlier than the Roman agricultural writers of 2000 years ago, the Chinese were well aware of the power that leguminous plants had of conferring fertility on the soil. This is due to the ability of the bacteria in nodules on the plant roots to fix nitrogen from the air, provided that there are traces of boron in the soil. But these are only one example of the soil bacteria that interact to the benefit of the plants and of ourselves.



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