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Advice on Health (No. 113)

RATS!

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Director of the Division of School Hygiene, Health Department)

IVILISED men have learned to keep their vermin at a distance" appears in a recent book on plague. It is true, but in a time of human strife, less warfare is waged with man's implacable enemy, the flea carrier—the rat. And it is the rat fleas that carry two desperate diseases to man, plague and typhus fever. Incessant vigilance at our ports keep these diseases from New Zealand-rats are caught and examined, and their fleas too, at the laboratories at Wellington and Auckland the year round, from overseas ships, which must be fumigated if infested.

Within the land, however, rats are increasing. I saw recently a rat-proofed store of meal and grain that by some carelessness—an open door probably—had been invaded. The tidy rows of sacks, tier upon tier, must have been an incentive to the mischievous nature of the rats. Having eaten their fill, they apparently scampered from sack to sack, gnawing a hole in this one, tearing out a whole side or end of another, scooping up piles of meal from others, until the final result was ruinous spoilage of most of the stored foodstuff. To put foodstuffs into unrat-proofed buildings is asking for trouble. If necessary to do so, such stores must be frequently inspected and rats constantly trapped and poisoned.

Rats serve no good purpose. They live anywhere, climb or swim, and eat anything. In New Zealand they not only destroy goods and foodstuffs, but they spread certain diseases—dysentery and food-poisoning and possibly a form of jaundice-by dirtying our foodstuffs with their excrets.

Back in 1920 it was estimated in England that a single rat did about 7/6 worth of damage per year-a total loss of £15,000,000 to the country each year. Rats are on the increase in New Zealand. They are doing damage in every port and town. They are invading our foodstores, shops, and eating-houses. You may have noticed that city councils have been advertising free rat poison; also successful prosecutions of careless restaurant-keepers for allowing their premises to be dirty and rat-infested. Rats are definitely becoming a nuisance. It will take the co-operation of householders, shopkeepers, warehousemen, and everybody to get their numbers down again. They breed prolifically-one pair of rats may within nine months give rise to a progeny of 880 rats.

War against rats involves both preventive and destructive measures. All food supplies must be protected, held in rat-proof containers, and all waste food placed in metal bins with close-fitting lids. Heaps of rubbish give shelter and food; all refuse round the place should be, removed or destroyed. Any burrows should be filled up with concrete, incorporating some broken glass. Powdered glass along a rat run is a deterrent.

To destroy rats, keep changing the methods. Use dogs and cats, or traps, or poison. (Barium carbonate is recommended.) Wherever there is extensive burrowing, fumigation will possibly be the method of choice.