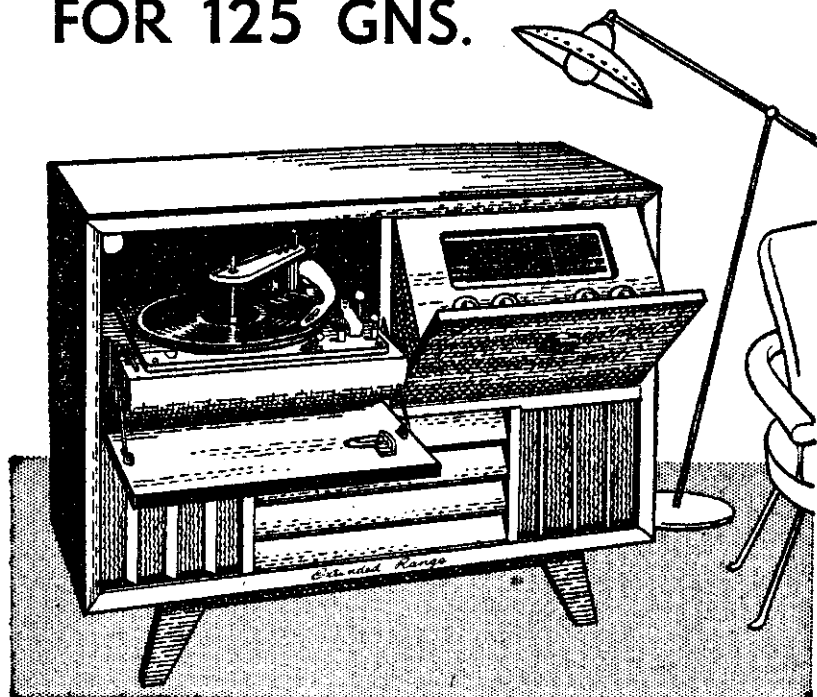


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The Wasteful Sleepers

THE correspondence columns of *The Times*, London, have been enlivened by a debate on sleep. It began after the death of a well-known person who believed that four hours were ample for a night's rest, and who had supported his belief by reaching a respectable age. Several readers approved and agreed. One man favoured five hours, explaining that the result of his own experiment had been "invigorating both mentally and physically." Further, "it has solved the problem of how a busy man can find time for other activities." As usual in discussions of this sort, personal experience grows into a generalisation. "Five hours' sleep is quite enough for me," the argument seems to run, "and therefore it should be enough for everybody else." It is almost as insufferable as the smugness of the reformed smoker who gently assures the addict that he, too, could become an emancipated soul.

Even harder to bear, however, is the suggestion that men who cut down their sleep are best able to lead a full life. No doubt there are "other activities" which could be usefully followed if we had time for them; but time is not enough: it is also necessary to have the right amount of energy. Some people need more sleep than others, even when they are in similar age groups; and sloth, condemned widely as a vice, will sometimes have more to do with glands than with moral turpitude. But hardest to understand is the view that time spent asleep is time "lost." Men have been known to estimate the number of years by which, through the rationing of sleep, their lives have been lengthened and enriched. This curious practice seems to rest upon the notion that a man is only alive when he is conscious. Possibly there are people so radiantly alive, their brains ticking over with the power and precision of dynamos, that every waking hour

can be spent profitably. But those who cling to the surface, and see only waste of time in sleep, do not know what riches of living they deny themselves.

Healthy sleep is a pleasant thing, and quite unpredictable. No man knows, when he eases himself into bed, what sort of night is before him. There are almost certain to be dreams—mostly, perhaps, no more than a murmur of the body; but sometimes they are strange and different, as if a message or a warning had been picked up at the frontiers of the mind. Dreams are said to be tiring if they are too frequent, and especially if they slide horribly into nightmare. These are hazards which normally attend the relaxation of control by the conscious mind. Yet control can become too rigid, and there must surely be some healing virtue in the incongruity and irrelevance of images which tease the quiet brain. And beneath the seeming chaos there may be order and meaning that only the total personality could understand. The problem that stays insoluble to the waking mind is often solved below consciousness. Every artist knows what he gains for his work in those hours of silent withdrawal. True, he has discovered illusion in the busy world, and knows that he is merely exchanging one set of dreams for another. But if there were no dreaming it would still be pleasure enough to drift along the soft edges of sleep, and an age or a minute later to swim up again to the morning. Those who are kept awake, by illness or nagging thought, would gladly exchange wakefulness for "wasted" hours. It may be a fine thing to plan and organise, so that time is neatly parcelled and ready for use; but life breaks in and snatches time away, or makes it painfully slow. And the end is always a sleep as wasteful as eternity.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 26, 1957.