

THE PREVENTION OF CONCEPTION.

DR. C. B. GILBERT opened a discussion on the subject, "Is the prevention of conception a justifiable proceeding?" He observed that this was a question which was being talked about in private life, and in private practice. We are put upon the witness stand as physicians, and asked, Is this practice justifiable? There are many good reasons why it is justifiable. There are some reasons why it is not. Why should not a woman if she choose prevent conception? It seemed to him to be a purely private affair, and there was no reason why she should ask us this question. It is usually supposed that when a woman enters the married state she will become a mother of children. However poor she may be, however unable to support a family, however much suffering she may undergo, she is supposed to bear as many children as possible. He objected to this on the score of inability to provide for the offspring alone. It is not with us as among nomadic tribes or the moslems, where the expenses of living amount to almost nothing. We have reached a higher plane of civilization, and we are prevented from availing ourselves of the conditions prevailing in a lower.

It was to be regretted that these matters were not taught in our schools, and that a man or woman should be compelled to learn the facts of sexual life, from actual experience. He asked if we gave the advice demanded—that the prevention of conception was justifiable—what would be the effect on ourselves? We lived under certain sanctions; there was the physical sanction. We lived under a law we could not avoid. If this practice was

contrary to that, if it was injurious to the organism, it was wrong from beginning to end. That is why abortion was wrong. Then, there was another sanction, the moral sanction. Some say it is against the moral law. He replied that it was not. The moral law says nothing about the matter. It was not a question of metempsychosis, it was a question of utilitarianism. If the practice was unharmed—and he considered it was—there could be no reason against the practice. It might be asked what would be its effect on single life. Would it endanger our civilization, our common Christianity? He thought not.

DR. HELEN WARNER had some convictions upon the subject, which she scarcely felt prepared to formulate this evening. She was surprised to hear opinions so radical as those propounded by Dr. Gilbert. These she did agree with. She did occasionally advise the prevention of conception. She considered it justifiable in cases where it is impossible for the woman to bring forth a living child. A woman should not be allowed to undergo a pregnancy that was likely to be fatal to herself, and in such cases she had not hesitated to advise the prevention of conception. She had not hesitated in cases where the patient was insane, or likely to become so. She was by no means so sure as Dr. Gilbert that any means of prevention which was sure was harmless. And for that reason alone she would never advise a woman to prevent conception, for the sake of gratifying an individual fancy, or even for the sake of not being able to support the offspring.

DR. FRANK W. BROWN thought we all pretty well agreed on the matter of moral abstention. He asked if by the prevention of conception, we alluded to moral or mechanical means. For his own part he favored both methods. He favored the application of morals, and where that is impossible, other expedients. It is this teaching of morals which are not observed, which is so detrimental to the progress of humanity. We have too high a standard to work on. We should look this matter fairly in the face. We know something about the ill-effects of surplus population. The law of Malthus shows that population tends to increase much more rapidly than the means of subsistence. As a result of this came pauperism, and we all know pauperism is at the bottom of the greater portion of crime. This was an important consideration. Every year the progress of medical science was making the condition of the world healthier. We did not have any of the great epidemics of former years. These small epidemics, such as recently occurred in the South, were

picayune affairs compared with the old epidemics which numbered their victims by millions, and the chances of diminishing offspring by these means were being lessened every day. How, then, are we to control the increase of population? The way was to persuade people not to have so many children. He thought it useless to tell people to abstain from sexual intercourse. The sexual instincts were the strongest we have, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred such advice would prove impracticable. He thought that statistics would not prove that prevention was injurious to woman. They would, however, prove that abstention was bad for man. When asked to advise some method for the prevention of conception he did so, for it must not be forgotten that in the majority of cases some means will be employed, perhaps more harmful than those recommended by a physician. The facts of every day life show us that a majority of people practice these methods, and among educated classes population is regulated. This high moral business would not go.

DR. T. A. MCGRAW regarded this one of the questions which will in the future be considered from the stand-point of social effect. It seemed to him the medical press had taken a mistaken line in making the matter a medical question. He could not see any wrong in the prevention of conception. When a woman came to him, whose husband had strong desires, who had multitudes of children, who was poverty-stricken and sick, who suffered from nausea, and other burdens almost too great to bear, and asked how she was to prevent having more children, he scarcely liked to advise non-intercourse. To give such advice, meant that the man would go to the brothel; it meant the breaking up of family ties and duties. It was an individual matter for each man and woman to say how many children they could support. These large and unmanageable families were wrong. The girls who were unprotected often went wrong. The boys become worthless without parental government. Far vaster wrongs proceed from large families than the prevention of conception. The conditions are altogether different now to fifty years ago, when every man could find support for ten or twelve children. He could not do this now, and should not be the parent of children he could not support.

DR. A. L. WORDEN said that there were doubtless many cases where this practice was proper and justifiable, but there were many cases where there is no excuse for it. It is not the poverty stricken people as a rule who come to us for this ad-

vice. It is those who are able to support a family, in eight cases out of ten, but who from society reasons desire to be without children. He thought that we should discriminate whom we should advise, and beware of too much leniency.

DR. MULHERON had not sufficiently formulated his ideas on this subject to express them here to-night. He was surprised to hear this called an individual matter. He regarded it as a society matter. When a man and woman entered the marital relation they assumed certain duties to society. He did not consider it was for us to lecture people on their social duties. If a woman considered she had a right to prevent conception, she would also have the right to empty the pregnant uterus. He considered the practice to be wrong.

DR. HUTTON agreed for the most part with the views expressed by Dr. McGraw. The question of how many children a family should consist of was a matter of individual and personal selection. The question was one of personal liberty, and if prevention could be accomplished without the infliction of physical harm, he had about made up his mind that it would be for the advantage of society. The actual means of prevention had not been spoken of to-night. He thought perhaps an irrigation of a bichloride of mercury solution might be effective.

DR. BONNING thought it was unfortunate for people to bring forth so many children. The nations who do not regulate population were now unable to support themselves. This was seen by the emigrants who seek our shores, who were Irish, German, Polish, but seldom French. France is now one of the richest and most prosperous countries of the world. If prevention can be safely prevented, he was of opinion that it should be.

DR. GIBSON thought every one should say exactly what they thought. He did not consider it was right to do wrong that good may come. The practice is wrong, and he endorsed all that Dr. Warner had said. If the prevention of conception is right, abortion is right. He regarded it as homicide.

DR. CHITTICK did not agree with this being an individual matter. He thought every physician should use his best judgment in giving advice.

DR. WEBBER remarked that it had been said this evening we were not moralists. It is a well-known fact that through sin, sickness and disease come into the world. It is through breach of the moral laws that we have, as physicians, obtained our

employment. It is a natural law which brings man and woman together for the purpose of cohabitation, and it is one of the natural laws to allow the results of that cohabitation to fulfil their course. It is natural for a woman to menstruate. It is natural that this physical law should find its expression in the ovaries. The ovaries should have rest, and pregnancy was the natural condition of ovarian rest. By thwarting this law, many diseases were engendered. Our American women are fast failing, and the women of the old country taking their place. It will soon be a rare thing to find a woman who can trace her ancestry back three generations. He thought the practices alluded to were decidedly harmful.

DR. BANKS thought the natural period of rest for the ovaries were the inter-menstrual periods. There may be cases where it is right to prevent conception, but she did not agree with many of the speakers to-night.

DR. STEVENS considered that every one should formulate their answer to this question themselves. The question was one which could not be separated from morals. He believed conception should be prevented in those cases where child bearing was dangerous to either mother or child. It should be prevented in all cases where heredity indicated mental incompetence. He thought that conception should be prevented by non-intercourse. He did not believe it was ever intended that the indulgence of a sexual appetite should be a pleasure, or that it should be pursued for pleasurable motives. A higher order of conduct prevailed among the lower animals than this would indicate.

DR. DEVENDORF was delighted at the high morality of his friend Dr. Mulheron; the angelic purity of the gentleman who had last spoken was beyond criticism, and as for the gentleman who described the practice as homicide, he would doubtless go in mourning after an erotic dream. We did not come here to discuss moral questions, but to enquire whether it is best for humanity to allow every man and woman to have as many children as possible. We know that nine-tenths of the educated classes are using means to prevent conception. As for the injuriousness of the practice, Dr. Van der Warker had some time ago examined a community in which these practices were carried out to the fullest extent, and no harm was found to have accrued to the females, and as for the males, they could stand it. He thought it for the good of humanity to limit the number of children.

DR. CARSTENS considered the ground pretty well covered. He did not agree with Dr. Gilbert that the affair was entirely personal. He thought it was a matter for the State. The reasons assigned by Dr. Warner for the prevention of conception were practically admitted as justifying abortion. He agreed with Dr. Stevens in preventing conception where hereditary reasons indicated; it was a positive crime for people to be married in the last stages of consumption. It was wrong for insane and criminal classes to perpetuate their race. He thought all insane and criminal individuals should be castrated. One of the objections to the prevention of conception was that it was practiced by those who ought to propagate the new race. Where the remedy was needed was among the pauper classes.

DR. GILBERT, in concluding the discussion, again repeated that there were no laws regulating the propagation of children. It is a matter which must be left for individuals to settle. Every one agrees that it is as natural to have intercourse as to have children. He remembered being called to see a young man whom he found in a house of prostitution. The man had two children and a home, but his wife was cold, and he had wandered into this resort. If the wife had known how to prevent conception, she would have been able to have retained him at home. It was a shame that these matters should not be known, it was absurd and ridiculous.

Adjourned.

F. W. MANN, M. D., Secretary.
