

T.B. TOLL

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“Official list of infectious diseases notified during week ending 22nd January last includes four new cases of pulmonary tuberculosis, and three deaths from the same disease.”

Week after week we read similar distressful news about the tragic progress of this insidious disease amidst the population of our islands. I do not possess a definite knowledge neither of the line of action which the Public Health Officials might have taken in the past to combat this evil, to protect the health of our community, nor of the results of any such action. It is evident, however, that for some time now fresh cases have been reported at the rate of from two to five per week. Deaths through tuberculosis have similarly increased. It is felt that if a vigorous anti-tuberculosis campaign is not launched wholeheartedly in due time, this scourge may yet prove to be a menace, it may yet, slowly but surely, claim an ever-increasing number of victims. The need of an anti-tuberculosis campaign should be seriously taken into consideration because in tuberculosis, perhaps more than in most other diseases, the saying “Prevention is better than cure” bears the utmost significance, mainly through the extents of its virulence as well as through the difficulty encountered in effecting a cure.

As R. W. Fair-brother writes, “The greatest danger to the community is not the frank case, which is easily diagnosed and controlled, but the unrecognised case and the carrier.” This problem of “the unrecognised case and the carrier” of tubercle bacilli which confronts our Public Health Officials is evidently made more difficult due to the carelessness and ignorance of the subject who unknowingly turns into a powerful “fifth columnist” who ceaselessly and secret-

ly sabotages the health of his fellow citizens. One surely knows that not all persons afflicted with tuberculosis are confined at Mdina within the precincts of Connaught Hospital or at St. Vincent de Paul Hospital which are capable of accomodating 149 and 30 patients respectively. Many unfortunate victims walk about the streets of Valletta, sip their coffee next to our table at the Premier and frequent public places as for example dance-halls and cinemas. These poor victims walk about amongst the non-tuberculous whom sooner or later they infect, simply because they do not know or do not care to take adequate precautions. Thus, these tuberculous saboteurs may be grouped into two categories. In one may be classified those who are ignorant of the fact that they are tuberculous and hence not to be blamed for spreading the disease, and in the other may be included that type of person who knows quite well that he is tuberculous but takes no adequate precautions through carelessness or indifference. To remedy this state of affairs, all and sundry must be made to realize that it is a crime to infect their fellow citizens. The Medical and Health Department can do much by distributing instructive pamphlets, exhibiting large illustrated posters in the streets, projecting health slides on the screen of our picture houses, delivering health talks, etc.

As my readers well know, infection in this case is brought about primarily by the inhalation of minute droplets which are sprayed around by sneezing and coughing individuals. Presence of dust and dried sputum are equally dangerous. Infections also occur very easily through eating and drinking any infected food or drink, or by using crockery or even forks, spoons, or knives which may happen to be contaminated with

tubercle bacilli. Hence we see that with the approach of the cold season which invariably brings along with it an increase in the number of people with colds and influenza, the careless "unrecognised case and the carrier" who wantonly coughs and sneezes right and left without at least the application of a handkerchief, plays havoc among his neighbours. Here it must also be borne in mind that the majority of people have not yet conquered that age-old superstition which involves closure of doors and windows. The extremists will even go so far as to stuff newspapers into ventilators! On the other hand, during the dry season or even during those periods when no rain falls, the risks of tuberculous infection are not diminished by any means because much dust accumulates in our streets especially in the neighbourhood of blitzed areas and areas under reconstruction. This accumulation of dust is not left undisturbed for it is easily stirred up by passing vehicles and by our "over zealous" street sweepers. It is also important to remember, that the average Maltese is in the habit of spitting too much. The flying dust particles, laden with a wonderful assortment of bacilli including the tubercle type derived from the dry sputum of "the unrecognised case and the carrier", are subsequently inhaled by a passer-by and thus we are presented with a classical example of infection through inhalation.

It is realized that one cannot do very

much to minimise the accumulation of dust coming from blitzed and reconstruction areas except perhaps by the removal of a great amount of rubble and an occasional irrigation of our streets with sea-water but certainly something must be done to convince the community to spit less! Some foreign governments very wisely "charge" a couple of pounds for every spit. Similarly not much can be done to prevent people from catching colds or influenza but on the other hand the public can be instructed to make use of their handkerchiefs when coughing and sneezing and to keep doors and windows open, especially in places where large numbers of people meet.

Personally I feel that the Public Health Officials are more than lax when dealing with problems of hygiene which involve the management of picture-houses, bars, dancing-halls, restaurants, and other public places. Proper supervision is not conducted to ensure that adequate hygienic measures are taken in protecting food from contamination; and in the proper washing of all used glasses, cups, spoons, etc. In various establishments cracked and unglazed crockery are also tolerated. To check the spread and to stamp out this scourge from among our population a serious drive must be started at once. An appeal must be made to the public to cooperate. Strict measures must be taken against defaulters of Sanitary Regulations, but first of all we must realize the danger!