

APPENDIX F.

MEDICAL INSPECTION AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION.

1. EXTRACT FROM THIRTY-NINTH ANNUAL REPORT OF THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION.

MEDICAL INSPECTION AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION.

EDUCATIONAL authorities are yearly placing more importance on the physical welfare of school-children. Recent events have emphasized the fact that the nation's efficiency depends to a large extent on the physical soundness of its men and women; and have made the duty of laying the foundation of that physical fitness in the children a very clear one. Four medical inspectors and eleven physical instructors were employed during the year 1915, and succeeded in covering a large amount of work.

The number of children medically examined by the Medical Inspectors was 17,138, of whom 12,002 were examined at the routine examination, being chiefly pupils of S2, and 5,136 were special cases examined for some suspected defect. As, roughly speaking, over 20,000 pupils pass through the primary schools each year, it is clear that with the existing staff it will not be possible to medically examine each child even once during its school life, especially as those remaining unexamined are, for the most part, in small country schools, difficult of access. In the case of Native schools, secondary schools, and private schools, medical inspection has not as yet been attempted.

The percentages of physical defects discovered at the examinations differ very little from those of the previous year. Only 12·9 per cent. of the children are entered as being free from defects of every kind, but it is to be borne in mind that many of the defects recorded are of a simple and easily remediable nature. Excluding dental disease, 40 per cent. are free from physical defects. The most common defect found is dental in character, the percentage suffering from this cause being 78·1. Medical inspectors continue to advise and urge parents to obtain dental attention for their children, and they report that so far as the town children are concerned, satisfactory results follow their notifications. A great deal of good work is being done by the free dental treatment given at the public hospitals in the large centres. The problem of obtaining dental treatment (and also optical treatment) for country children is, however, a difficult one which will have to await solution until normal conditions again prevail.

Subnormal nutrition and malnutrition are reported in the case of 18·3 per cent. of the children examined at the routine examination. There is naturally a difficulty in deciding which children to place in this class; but it is worthy of note that above this percentage the Medical Inspectors draw attention to the large number of children in the schools who are not enjoying the perfect health and fitness that should be theirs. The importance of improving the condition of such children so as to obtain the nearest possible approach to physical and mental perfection is emphasized as being as great, if not greater, than that of curing those suffering from pronounced defects. It is not within the power of the educational authorities, except by spreading enlightenment and advice, to remove all of the causes contributing to physical unfitness, but it is their duty to ensure that at least during school-hours the child has the fresh air, warmth, light, exercise, and rest that its constitution requires.

No complete statistics are available to show what proportion of the children, notified as being in one way or another physically defective, receive the necessary treatment, but the reports of the Medical Inspectors generally are in favour of the assumption that the proportion is essentially satisfactory.