

MENTAL DEFICIENCY.

A report on the work of this division would be incomplete without a reference to the subject of mental deficiency in children as having a far-reaching and extremely important bearing upon the social and economic welfare of the community. The present provisions for dealing with these feeble-minded cases is admittedly inadequate. A complete and far-seeing scheme is very much needed in the interests of our social economy. School medical officers report cases of mentally deficient children who are either partially or completely unable to derive benefit from attendance at ordinary schools, and who are frequently a source of trouble to school-teachers. Many such children if attending an ordinary school are of necessity more or less neglected by the teachers owing to the impossibility of giving them the individual attention which they particularly require: others are not capable of attending school at all. These children, according to the degree of their defectiveness, tend to become derelict, and later on disorganize the social machine. On the other hand, there is a growing consensus of opinion that a large number of the criminal, refractory, and inefficient members of society are the subject of inherent mental or moral defect.

In this connection one school medical officer writes: "With a population of one million the problem could, I think, be faced squarely and dealt with, but as the population increases it will get out of hand." Speaking of the expense that would be involved, the same officer in a previous report says: "By following up the histories of a group of feeble-minded children it can be shown that the expense is inevitable and is incurred less profitably later on. I have traced the fate at the end of two years of all the children who had left one of the large city schools two years previously on account of reaching the school age-limit without passing the second standard. They were all cases of feeble-mindedness of the upper or upper-middle grade. Only two of these children could not be traced. Of the rest, in the short space of two years nearly all the girls had found their way into rescue homes, and most of the boys were in reformatories or gaols. Of the few that remained some were doing very poor work, some were unemployed and unemployable, and were for the time being saved from coming on the State in a dishonourable capacity by their parents providing for them." Apart from the economic reasons for making systematic provision for these cases, it is well known that life in well-managed institutions, amongst their mental equals, with simple pleasures and suitable tasks, is far happier than the discordant lives that many of them lead in the world at present.

SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS.

In view of the very large number of children passing through their hands, school medical officers have an exceptional opportunity to collect information of value in elucidating problems connected with the health and education of children. The large volume of work connected with their more regular duties, however, does not permit their devoting more than a limited amount of time to research of this kind. In this connection special reference must be made to experiments which are being carried on in the Canterbury and Wanganui Districts with regard to the treatment of goitre in school-children by the administration of very small doses of iodine. In one of these experiments a total of 596 children have been under treatment during the year, and observations have also been kept of 756 untreated children. So far the results are on the whole very encouraging; the experiments are proving well worth while, and should be continued. It may, however, be necessary to study the effects of the treatment for a number of years before any very decided pronouncement can be made as to permanent results.

SECTION 6—MEDICAL EXAMINATION OF CANDIDATES FOR THE TEACHING PROFESSION.

In order that the medical examination of candidates for the teaching profession might be organized on a basis which would be more satisfactory to the Education service, it was decided last year that this work should be undertaken by the school medical staff. As a general scheme throughout the Dominion this was undertaken for the first time at the beginning of 1922. A uniform scheme of procedure and standard of examination has subsequently been evolved with a view to placing the matter on a basis best calculated to safeguard the service and give satisfaction to the candidates. One great advantage of having these examinations conducted by the school medical staff is that provision can be made for the examining officers to keep in touch with individual candidates after entering upon their career, and also that they are afforded the opportunity of advising these young teachers about their health and habits of life. In this connection a leaflet entitled "Health Hints for Entrants to the Teaching Profession," in which the main essentials of healthy living are briefly summarized, has been issued by the Department to the candidates examined. The present scheme, moreover, offers an opportunity for studying the standard of health of the teaching profession more systematically than would otherwise be possible.

It is indeed difficult in a few words to make any very definite statement with regard to the *standard of health and physique* of these candidates. As would naturally be expected in the case of young students—most of them in the early prime of life—their standard of health has appeared in the majority of instances to be of a relatively high order. Caution, however, should be observed in drawing conclusions from a too limited view of the matter. A truer estimate of the ultimate physical efficiency which is likely to result in these candidates over an average period of life-service in their profession can, I think, be arrived at by taking notice of the number and nature of their physical defects and the illnesses from which they have suffered in the past. It is well known, for instance, that some of the more serious diseases from the point of view of failure of health in adult life have their origin largely in common defects, such as dental caries, unhealthy tonsils, and so on, existing during the school-going years.