

FIRST SESSION

Adolescence and its problems

WELCOME

Dr W. H. Hylton, M.R.C.S., M.R.C.G.P. L.R.C.P., (*Provost of the South-west England Faculty*)

IT is my very pleasant duty to welcome you all to this symposium and to thank the speakers for coming here to address us on this very important topic. This subject which covers many disciplines is nobody's 'special pigeon' but it should be one of the special interests of general practice, the more so as medicine, and general practice in particular is, as the College motto suggests, a question of caring, and not just one of medical diagnosis and treatment. The College motto *Cum Scientia Caritas* has been freely translated as 'With tender loving care' but our tender, loving care must have a scientific basis.

Our thanks are specially due to Professor Hubble for coming here; we know that he chaired a working party of the World Health Organization on the problems of adolescence throughout the world and he has made a special study of it. To him along with our speakers, who are specialists in their own branches, both medical and lay, we extend a very hearty welcome. I must also thank Messrs Geigy who have not only been generous hosts, but have been responsible for organizing and arranging this symposium.

OPENING REMARKS

Professor D. V. Hubble, C.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P. (*Professor of paediatrics and child health, dean of medical faculty, University of Birmingham*):

Let us begin by defining adolescence as a state of pre-maturity, and a state of transition of emergence between childhood and pre-adult maturity. We all recognize that the rate of maturation in any individual is different from the rate of maturation in other individuals. There is a wide scatter, a gaussian curve with a wide spread in the rate of maturation between one young person and another. Not only is there this difference between individuals but there is also an internal difference in the rate of maturation both in social and sexual behaviour and between the different systems of the body. This makes it impossible for us to give adolescence a really tidy definition. If you are regarding adolescents from the point of view of their state of sexual maturation, then this provides one description. If you are an educationalist you may say that a child is approaching maturity when he leaves school at the age of 16 or 18, but the social maturation of such individuals will have travelled at very different speeds. As we seek to describe adolescence, metaphors are useful to us in forming a total picture. We may talk about the 'plasticity' of adolescence, a particularly useful metaphor because it carries with it a suggestion of moulding. There are pressures on the adolescent and these pressures may come either from within or without, they may be endogenous or exogenous. We may change our metaphor again and describe adolescence as a state of suspension

before crystallization occurs and the final crystal is formed. We may usefully describe it as a state of suspension in the young between what they have been and what they are to become. We use the word 'brittle' in medicine when we talk about 'brittle diabetics', people who are in control one moment and who may be out of control the next. There are adolescents of this sort and this rapid alteration between stability and instability is characteristic of many 'problem' adolescents.

The psychiatric approach—Drug addiction

Dr W. Warren, M.A., M.D., M.R.C.P., D.P.M. (*Bethlem Royal Hospital and The Maudsley Hospital, London*)

I AM a psychiatrist dealing with individual adolescents; this is a main concern of mine even though they are difficult and puzzling at times. I want to start with a word of warning, because if we are talking about their problems we may get the whole matter out of proportion and end up, as do a lot of other people, running down the young, whereas I wish to defend them.

Firstly, there are some psychiatric concomitants of physical development, for instance the boy or girl of 16 who is immature, but competing with more physically mature but perhaps younger colleagues, and of the anxiety and stress this may cause. Very tall or short adolescents can also experience anxiety because they feel different, and at this age again the miseries of acne vulgaris can arise. There is another physical phenomenon which is seldom realized; that of lack of energy due to rapid growth. Thus, a boy of 15, growing fast, starts spending his whole time lying on the floor and listening to the record player while eating sweets, while his father tries to get him out of doors to take healthy exercise. His school reports fall off in regard to his work, but when his rapid growth has slowed down, his energies return and he goes ahead normally.

I would remind you too that adolescents with psychiatric problems referred to consultants may be found to have physical disease which should not be missed; for example, iron deficiency anaemia. I have seen two cases of myasthenia gravis in what appeared to be depressed, inadequate youngsters. Tuberculosis is sometimes missed, and a rare condition is a postventricular tumour leading to morning headache and vomiting; this stops the youngster from going to school but seems to clear by 11 o'clock when it's too late to go. It is not surprising that this behaviour is sometimes misjudged.

All adolescents whatever their background have the particular psychological characteristics of their age group. They think and feel as adolescents do. For instance, they are trying to achieve independence from the family and they may get a bit rebellious. At the same time, they are idealistic and are apt to day-dream. Their sexual inclinations can be important and sometimes lead to problems. They want at one moment to be grown up and at another to remain childish, so that they are typically indecisive in their attitudes. Most of this is normal but these phenomena can veer into the abnormal. The adolescent who rebels too hard and too far may be brought to the doctor, and careful clinical judgement may be necessary to decide whether some unusual sexual misbehaviour is a temporary upset or something more serious; perhaps the unfolding of some perversion. It is not always easy to make up one's mind. Young people's