THE AETIOLOGY OF CONGENITAL ANOMALIES

WELCOME

Professor A. G. Watkins, *Professor of Child Health in the Welsh National School of Medicine.*

The question of congenital defects and their aetiology has become a very popular subject in recent years, and it is appropriate that the College of General Practitioners should organize a symposium on it. There is some debate whether congenital defects are in fact more common than they were, and this is one reason why the subject has become important. A second reason is the great stimulus to this study as a result of the thalidomide disaster; in British fashion we generally turn a disaster to some good in the end, and the thalidomide episode will, I am sure, ultimately bring home to all of us the importance of prenatal care and the importance of congenital defects of prenatal origin. Thirdly, there has been the great stimulus due to the increasing work being done on chromosome problems; I hope we shall have a little clarification of these problems today. Lastly, congenital anomalies have increased in interest because of the tremendous contribution surgeons and anaesthetists have made to the treatment of so many of these congenital defects.

We are concerned here particularly with the aetiology of these various defects, and the two main things to be considered are the hereditary side and the environmental side. An age-old problem is the relative importance of heredity and environment. Some time ago a small boy sitting at the breakfast table saw on his father's plate the school report, so he braced himself up and said: " Dad,

before you read that school report I would like to ask you a question". "Very good, my boy. What do you want to know?" He said: "Well, Dad, I don't think it's going to be a very good report, but what I want to know is, if it isn't a good one, do you think this is largely because of my heredity or my environment?" This still remains a problem.

We have here a number of experts, many of whom have travelled long distances to tell us about their researches and their studies. When you read original papers in genetics they are often very difficult to follow because it is a subject that many of us do not understand, and which introduces a new nomenclature. This applies to some extent to all new scientific work and to all generations. I do not think I have the slightest prospect of ever understanding anything about electronics or space physics, but for the next generation this knowledge comes in with their mother's milk, except that very few of them, of course, have mother's milk! The new generation seems to pick up the threads, but in order that we of the older generation can follow these erudite studies, we need an opportunity like today's symposium in which the real purpose is to ask our speakers to simplify and explain to us the difficulties of a relatively new subject, and to present to us what one might call the filtrate of their expert knowledge. With these very brief remarks, ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasant duty to declare this symposium officially open.

THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL VIEW OF CONGENITAL ANOMALIES

(Based on information gathered by members of the College of General Practitioners)

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The Problem and Some Results

B. C. S. Slater, M.D. (*Harrow*)

Although Dr Watson and I are representing the College here this morning, we do so with deep gratitude to the 1,250 members who