

MR. HERBERT MORRISON'S ADDRESS TO PRISON MEDICAL OFFICERS

Speaking at the luncheon of the Prison Medical Officers' Association in London today, Mr. Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, said:

"I look forward to a considerable development after the war in prison medical service, particularly on the side of mental treatment, for I believe that in this field there is hope of great progress in the task of turning prisoners into useful members of society who can be relied upon not to go wrong again,

"This work in the study of the mental side of crime was developing well until 1939. Just before the war there was published a valuable report on the subject by two specialists. Unfortunately it was smothered by the outbreak of hostilities and the work itself came to an end for various reasons arising out of war circumstances. I am glad to say that it has recently been found possible to re-start it in the prison where it was originally carried on -- Wormwood Scrubs. To develop this work beyond the stage of study and a limited amount of treatment will require a new hospital, more staff and various other things that we know we cannot hope to get until after the war. But when that time comes I hope it will be one of the matters to which early attention can be given.

"But besides this work on the mental treatment of prisoners there is a great deal of work in the care of their physical health which has of course never ceased, though it has had to be carried on by reduced numbers of medical officers in wartime conditions which have made their task not less but greater than in peace. Our prison population has gone up from 10,326 in 1939 to 12,400 in 1942, much of the increase being the result of the creation of new wartime offences by Defence Regulations. In addition to this increase in numbers there has been an increase in the incidence of certain types of disease, including venereal disease, among prisoners entering prison.

"Moreover, the personal lot of the prison medical officer has not been made easier by an influx into prison, as is usual during wartime, of a type of prisoner used to higher standards than the normal prison population and accordingly more critical. Criticism and high standards are good things, and I know that the prison medical officers have borne it patiently and striven to learn from it, even though they may feel that it is often unfair through its failure to take account of the special and inevitable difficulties of wartime.

"I would like to pay tribute to the work of these officers. Whatever the critics may say, the evidence of the value of their unremitting care is unmistakable. There is no doubt that the health of prisoners at the end of their sentences shows a general all-round improvement by comparison with what it is when they enter jail. This is a fact about which there can be no argument. The prison medical officers care not only for the personal well-being of individuals, but also for the maintenance of proper standards of cleanliness, hygiene, sanitation, ventilation, heating and lighting, and they can take full credit for the improvement in health that occurs.

"I hope it may be found possible to make the prison medical services an integral part of the new comprehensive health and medical service on the plans for which my colleague, the Minister of Health, is now busily engaged. With the best will in the world - and prison medical officers are a devoted body of men - it is difficult to avoid stagnation if there is no opportunity for medical officers to move about between prisons and other fields of work, and if they cannot hope for change and promotion of a kind that is impossible within the restricted prison field. If this change can be made it will be good for the prisoners, good for the medical officers in prisons and good, I believe, for the medical service as a whole because of the special experience the new arrivals can contribute."

HOME OFFICE