“Too frankly human and not strict science”: A Tale of Psychiatry and Eugenics at the Johns Hopkins Hospital

Timour Al-Khindi, MS2

Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD

BACKGROUND

- Adolf Meyer (Figure 1) was the first director of the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at the Johns Hopkins Hospital (1910-1941).
- Meyer approached psychiatry through his theory of psychobiology, which held that mental illness is best understood by considering all domains of a patient’s life, including biology, behaviors, environment, and heredity.
- Advances in genetics, increasing immigration to the USA, and the worldwide growth in nationalism at the turn of the 20th century contributed to the rise of eugenics, a movement concerned with improving the hereditary composition of a population (Figure 2).
- Meyer participated in eugenics organizations, but his views on eugenics have never been studied systematically.

PURPOSE

- To study Meyer’s views on eugenics – particularly those concerning birth control, sterilization, and immigration restriction – and to understand these in the context of Meyer’s career and the broader American eugenics movement.

METHODS

EUGENICAL NEWS

VOL II. JULY, 1917. NO. 7

Figure 3. Eugenical News was the central publication of the American eugenics movement.

- The materials for this study include Meyer’s published work and archival materials from the Chesney Medical Archives (letters, speeches, articles, and working notes) (Figure 3). Secondary sources were consulted to gain insight into the history of the American eugenics movement.

RESULTS

Birth Control

- Meyer acknowledged the role of heredity in mental illness, but remained skeptical about the certainty of Mendelian genetics, accusing Mendelism and, more broadly, the field of statistics of oversimplifying the complexity of human beings.
- Children of mental defectives, according to Meyer, are at increased risk of developing mental illness because they grow up in a deprived, cognitively desolate home. It was poor parenting, more than tainted heredity, that motivated Meyer to advocate for birth control.
- Meyer opposed abortion not for moral or ethical reasons, but because of the risk to the mother’s life.
- Meyer supported the idea of a birth control clinic in Baltimore, but did not take initiative in the clinic’s operations once it opened.

Sterilization

- Meyer vehemently opposed the Comstock Act, which prevented dissemination of contraceptive advice through print materials and discussion of contraception in medical journals. Meyer persuaded the American Medical Association to lobby against the Comstock Act, which was overturned in 1936.

- Supporting the feebleminded was economically expensive. Sterilization was proposed as a more affordable alternative.
- Meyer thought that public support for sterilization could be won by focusing on voluntary sterilization. Meyer opposed forced sterilization.
- Sterilization laws in the 1930s, according to Meyer, were becoming “an emotional affair.” Meyer believed that sterilization must be considered on a case-by-case basis rather than applied liberally.
- Meyer felt that doctors performing sterilization should be protected from persecution.
- Instead of hospitals acting as mere shelters, Meyer wanted hospitals to act as schools to help the feebleminded become useful in society.

Immigration Restriction

- As early as the 1890s, Meyer showed interest in examining brain differences between African-Americans and Caucasians.
- In his correspondence with the International Commission on Eugenics (ICE), Meyer cautioned against growing xenophobia in the USA.
- Meyer criticized the indiscriminate use of IQ tests to screen immigrants for mental illness (Figure 4).
- Meyer accused ICE of using science to give false credibility to a movement fueled, in reality, by xenophobia.

CONCLUSIONS

- Meyer was, at heart, a theorist. He developed opinions about eugenics, but seldom acted on his ideas.
- Meyer’s interest in sterilization was influenced as much by economics as it was by a desire to improve the health of society.
- Though Meyer supported birth control and voluntary sterilization, he disagreed with the eugenics movement’s emphasis on Mendelian genetics, its overreliance on IQ tests, and its underlying xenophobia (hence his description of eugenics as being “too frankly human and not strict science”).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Daniel Todes for his guidance and the Departments of Student Affairs and Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences for financial support.