CHAPTER IV

The Influence of the London Epidemiological Society

Inasmuch as both Drs. Haven Emerson and E. S. Godfrey mentioned their respect, amounting almost to reverence, of the London Epidemiology Society for the part that it had played in the founding of the AES, the older organization deserves some attention here. According to an account by Thomson, published in 1965, the London Society was established in 1850 during a period significant in British medical history when "the conscience of the thinking minority was profoundly disturbed by prevailing conditions." In other words, the London Society was conceived in desperation and born with a purpose of doing something about the situation. It was well nigh essential in the mid-nineteenth century that more control be exerted over the grim urban conditions which had hitherto allowed infectious diseases to spread and to flourish.

At the first meeting of the London Society some 200 men were present and it is said that the audience included such figures as "Dr. Addison and Dr. Bright of Guy's Hospital, who were at the height of their fame . . . Amongst others were John Simon who had just been appointed Medical Officer of Health of the City of London and was then advocating the establishment of a Ministry of Health, and John Snow who had begun to investigate the epidemiology of cholera in Soho." It is just possible that Snow's contemporary findings incriminating cholera as a water-borne infection had begun to attract attention.

Thomson's account goes on to describe the appalling annual mortality associated with 15 major infectious diseases in 1850. No wonder that the great figures in Medicine had been aroused and were willing to put in an early appearance at the newly formed Society which had been heralded as one which was "to promote the control of infectious disease."

During the first decade of the Society's existence reports of its meetings can be found in the Lancet, the British Medical Journal, the now defunct Medical Times, and the Sanitary Review. But after 1860 the Society published its own proceedings as the Transactions of the Epidemiological Society of London. These were the volumes which have proved such fascinating reading to the founding fathers and other members of the AES. Herein was a review of an exciting era, particularly between 1860-1900, a period starting with great epidemics and then a gradual decline when the harvest created by discoveries made by Snow, Budd, Pasteur, Koch

\[1\] I am indebted to Dr. J. N. Morris of London, for calling my attention to this article recording events under which the London Epidemiological Society was founded (1).
and their followers began to be reaped. It was not entirely with infectious disease that the London Society was concerned. Scurvy occupied a prominent place in its programs, as well as some communications on exophthalmic goitre and myxedema.

Two important developments took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century in which the London Society played no little part. It was through the Society’s efforts that notification of infectious disease was instituted in 1889. The contributions of William Farr, and the influence he wielded in putting the discipline of vital statistics on the map, can be traced through the Society’s early meetings. It came into its own when as early as 1879, Longstaff presented a laborious statistical study, in which it was suggested that scarlatina, puerperal fever, erysipelas, pyaemia and rheumatism accompanied by heart affection, might all have a common etiology. This prophetic contribution indicative of the protean nature of streptococcosis, was not to be understood or substantiated until some 50 years later.

With the inevitable decline in infectious disease, the London Epidemiological Society having been in existence for some 50 years came to a temporary end, but not for long. Its successor, the Section on Epidemiology and State Medicine (later to be known as Section on Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine) of the Royal Society of Medicine followed close upon its demise. Prominent in the Section’s later title was the idea that emphasis should be placed on prevention, although different kinds of diseases were to be prevented than those which had flourished in mid-nineteenth century, e.g., accidents involving motor vehicles, heart disease, cancer and even mental illness. Furthermore, this new section of the Royal Society of Medicine performed far more functions than fostering the application of the current principles of epidemiology. Thus, in the early 1930s, Major Greenwood, the ranking authority among British epidemiologists, used to indulge now and again in discussions of ethical questions relating to public health.

At about this time, my colleague, Dr. James D. Trask, Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine, who was soon to become a member of the AES, spent a sabbatical year at Oxford University (1929–1930). He told me that during his stay he hardly ever missed a meeting of the Epidemiological Section of the Royal Society of Medicine. When I came over to join him in the spring of 1930, we both had the opportunity of hearing Dr. Greenwood express his philosophical views on Epidemiology—spelled with a capital E—at a London meeting of the Section, and to witness his eloquence in expounding his thoughts on what is good for mankind. It was an experience that could not help but make a lasting impression. Dr. Greenwood was very active in the Section of Epidemiology at this time. In his presidential address before the Section he commented as follows: “It is not part of my theme, but I cannot resist the temptation to say that to make life more liveable seems to me quite as worthy a motive for medicine as to make it longer.” Along this line, “the words of Aristotle uttered some 2000 years previously, should be remembered, that the end of the state is not mere life, it is rather a good quality of life.”

Major Greenwood gave the Herter Lectures for 1931 at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (2). During his visit to the United States he attended a session of the American Epidemiological Society, which met in New Haven, in December 1931. Here he matched wits with Aycock, Emerson, Rosenau, Winslow (a guest), L. T. Webster, and E. B. Wilson. It was a memorable occasion which set the pace for many another meeting of our society.
The AES had been established with the avowed purpose “that we promote the study and discussion of epidemiological problems.” This would seem to be more of an academic ideal than the London Society’s original purpose of some 75 years before, which was actually to promote the control of infectious disease. But, eventually the principles of the two societies turned out to be similar—the same curiosity about the behavior and workings of disease, the same explorations into the philosophy of epidemiology, and—occasionally, the same moralizing as to what is good at the moment—for mankind.

REFERENCES
1. Thomson, D. Changes in epidemiology and preventive medicine. Proc. Roy. Soc. Med. 58, 831–837 (1965).
2. Greenwood, M. “Epidemiology, Historical and Experimental.” The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1932.