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Editorial

The Editor

Abstract

There has been a heartening increase of discussion recently in medical and other literature, about the “side-effects” of industrial and medical progress and expansion — namely pollution and over-population. It is particularly good to see the medical profession ruminates a little less, and start to call for and take action over the population problem.

Most people, including the Government, tend to feel over-population is a problem mainly confined to the “underdeveloped” countries. It is certainly true that from sheer weight of numbers their problem is that much greater: also, because 40-45% of their population are under 15 years, their populations will continue to rise for some forty years after the fertility level has fallen to the replacement level. But Britain must nonetheless do her share towards population stability, not only for the world’s sake but also for her own. We, the U.K., are the eighth most densely populated country; England and Wales alone would be second only to Formosa; and currently births are exceeding deaths by 300,000 every year.

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EDITORIAL

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Most people, including the Government, tend to feel over-population is a problem mainly confined to the "underdeveloped" countries. It is certainly true that from sheer weight of numbers their problem is that much greater: also, because 40-45% of their population are under 15 years, their populations will continue to rise for some forty years after the fertility level has fallen to the replacement level. But Britain must nonetheless do her share towards population stability, not only for the world's sake but also for her own. We, the U.K., are the eighth most densely populated country; England and Wales alone would be second only to Formosa; and currently births are exceeding deaths by 300,000 every year. The problems of overcrowding and pollution, with all their attendant detriments to health (both physical and mental) are not unknown to us already, and can but increase as the population rises. Ultimately, of course, shortage of food and other natural resources can only lead to malnutrition, starvation, and loss of necessities such as heat and power. The integrated rate of increase of ecological demand on agriculture, industry and mining is now 5.6%/year, and the population increase 2% — we cannot with impunity continue to use up natural resources at such an increasing rate.

And both rates are exponential in type, giving them a somewhat benign appearance at present, but shattering in effect before too long.

The medical profession can do much in the way of prevention. It is also in some ways responsible — not only because better medical care has contributed to the problem but also because the burden of a sick populace will fall on the profession if no prevention is taken. Doctors are a body of highly intelligent people in a particularly good position to influence the public and Government: we should use this influence fully, and now, while success can still be achieved.

The most important means of prevention that should be taken is education. A full-scale campaign is needed, employing all the means of mass education available — television and radio, newspapers and journals, instruction at schools and universities, and possibly even material incentives as already given in India. In support of such education the Government has a vital role: to ensure the continuing liberal nature of the abortion laws, while ruling out regional differences; to extend family planning facilities in the N.H.S., with prescription of free contraceptives; to extend the number of beds for abortion, vasectomy and sterilisation; and, not irrelevantly, to legislate in favour of better career prospects for women. The medical profession must take upon itself the job of bantering the Government until such steps are taken, and itself initiate mass education with all the means at its disposal.

Some people get fanatical about these matters, and cry Doom. Doom is only one alternative — let's take the other.