

SCIENTIFIC METHODS AND SOME SERVICE PROBLEMS

Conference of M.R.C. Workers and Service and Industrial M.O.s

REPORTED BY

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HARD things are often said of specialists by the we-do-all-the-work classes and research workers have not been sacrosanct. Those demands for transport to urgent investigations, those vehement criticisms in committee of the official mind as expressed in regulations may have created at times the impression that the "heaven borne" are to be found in other than religious or administrative circles.

Unjustifiable as such an impression might be there seems to be a need (if wartime experience counts for anything) for more knowledge in the Service of the ways and motives of the research worker. If the more ordinary worker could be convinced of this need, perhaps the pursuit of the necessary knowledge would lead to better general acquaintance with "the field" in which the research worker may find scope and facility.

Holding these views, it was intriguing to hear of a conference to be arranged by the Medical Research Council between its workers and Service and industrial medical officers. The scene was the London School of Hygiene whose large lecture theatre was filled to capacity on the last three days of March and in one of whose laboratories were displayed exhibits and demonstrations of the work of the various M.R.C. units now in existence throughout the country.

It was interesting to attempt to identify members of the audience and to note any difference in the appearance of industrial and Service M.O.s and research workers. Hair styles are less reliable than they used to be.

The conference was opened by Dr. H. P. Himsworth, Secretary of the Medical Research Council, who outlined the scope of the subjects to be dealt with.

The first of the series of lectures on scientific method in field surveys was given by Professor Bradford Hill who by his lucid discussion of general principles provided an admirable introduction reminiscent of his most acceptable writing on medical statistics.

Two other medical statisticians (Drs. Reid and Doll) followed Professor Hill and gave accounts of actual surveys, one of absence due to sickness amongst G.P.O. workers and the other of occupational factors in peptic ulcer.

In the afternoon Professor J. H. Squire of Birmingham University spoke of the relationship between field surveys and laboratory research and of the necessity for clear statement of the problems undertaken. He referred to some

of his own early experiences in the Army of military personnel research and drew lessons from them.

Dr. Alice Stewart, Acting Director of the Institute of Social Medicine at Oxford, in the last lecture of the day, gave a most interesting account of work on occupational and domiciliary factors in pulmonary tuberculosis.

From 5-6 p.m. on each day laboratory demonstrations were given by members of the various M.R.C. units concerned in the conference, e.g. Pneumokoniosis, Toxicology, Industrial Medicine, Applied Psychology, etc. Here was opportunity of meeting the research worker on his own ground and of asking those questions which bring pleasure (or irritation) to the demonstrator.

The second day's proceeding opened with a masterly lecture by Dr. Donald Hunter on "Fluorosis and Berylliosis as Industrial and Community Health Hazards." Factual information was great and very valuable as a guide to the extent of these hazards and the further work that was necessary.

Reference to B.A.L. struck a familiar note and was amongst the subjects dealt with by Dr. Barnes of the Toxicology Research unit who spoke on "The use of Experimental Pathological Techniques for the assessment of the Toxicity of Chemical Compounds."

In the afternoon Dr. T. Bedford, well known for his writing on environmental conditions, spoke on "The effects of warmth and comfort on efficiency." He was followed by Dr. Weiner and Dr. Darous of the Climate and Working Efficiency Unit who discussed effects of heat and anatomical factors in machine designs.

On the final day, Professor Sir Frederic Barlett spoke on the "Laboratory Analysis of Human Activities" and had something to say as well on the study of efficiency, the elimination of fatigue and the likely decrease in the satisfaction which might be obtained from work.

The final meeting of the conference was devoted to an account of the work of the Pneumokoniosis Research Unit at Cardiff and of problems of investigation, of selection of cases for examination and of assessment of symptoms.

Dr. Himsworth in closing the conference referred to the combination of fundamental laboratory work and field work, to the necessity for recognition and definition of problems and to the translation of laboratory solutions into the language of the executive. His audience were appreciative of this summary.

The Service representatives who voiced appreciation (Major-General T. Young for the Army) referred to the value of the conference not only in methodology but also in the range of factual detail of the work of the M.R.C. units.

Dr. Himsworth and the other speakers must have been addressing a concentration of industrial and Service medical experience which has not been equalled since the war. On his side there must have been few occasions when

the might of the M.R.C. has been massed to the same extent for public view and hearing.

Is it too much to hope that for Service purposes at any rate, the same parties might meet again to mutual benefit? It may be that the younger research worker for instance might benefit from further acquaintance with Service conditions and tradition and that the Service Officer, regarding research methods, might not excuse himself in the words of the Psalmist.

“Lord, I am not high minded; I have no proud looks. I do not exercise myself in great matters which are too high for me.”

Psalm 131, verses 1, 2 (Prayer Book version).