The American Journal of Human Genetics

Vol. 9 No. 1 *March 1957*

The Local Eugenics Society[1]

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THE TITLE of my paper, "The Local Eugenics Society", refers to a specific organization, The Minnesota Human Genetics League. The name, Human Genetics League, is technically more correct than the term Eugenics Society because the Human Genetics League would be willing, no doubt, to support work in human genetics which had no conceivable application to problems of human welfare. I would not ask the members to support any work unless there was a reasonable possibility that it would have significance for some of the genetic problems which perplex the thoughtful members of our world.

There is no question but that laymen who give their money to support human genetics research do so with the expectation that some findings from the research will eventually contribute something directly to the improvement of the genotype of our own species, Homo sapiens. These contributors are not fastidious as to the details of the research, nor will they try to dictate the choice of subject matter to be studied. However, it is my impression that projects concerned with the genetic and environmental factors affecting mental health will be very acceptable to any local Eugenics Society.

The laymen who contribute to a Human Genetics Society do so because they wish to make life better and happier for future generations, even though frequently they have no descendants themselves. As the childless person has made no genetic contribution to future generations, it is natural that he should be willing to devote some portion of his time and means to the organizations dedicated to an attempt to improve the future life on this planet.

Thus, in effect, gatherings of people who will promote genetic research, even if it is only with fruit flies and bread molds, are eugenics societies, regardless of what name they use, and even if they deny it.

There are some who think that any eugenics program must fail because the genotype of man is in such a rigid equilibrium that no appreciable changes could be brought about by humanitarian methods. Such people are mistaken. They cannot see into the future because their minds are shackled by the mistakes of some eugenics programs of the past. They fail to recognize that human society has carried out practical eugenics programs of defective gene elimination for centuries. At present persons with serious genetic defects, as well as those with serious environmental defects, are denied reproduction by being placed in institutions or by careful supervision of the sick person in the home. These methods are so universally acceptable that most people do not recognize their great importance in holding down our genetic load of deleterious mutations.

These people, who have been so preoccupied with the mistakes of the past, have aided and abetted the growth of the myth that any eugenics program must depend

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[1] Presidential address delivered at the ninth annual meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics at the University of Connecticut, August 28, 1956.

upon some mechanical method of birth control and a violation of human rights, if it is to be effective. It is easy to show that this concept is false. The very neat demonstration by Allison that the elimination of malaria would in itself cut down the frequency of the gene for sickle cell anemia very appreciably in relatively few generations, is a case in point. Certainly no one can object to the eradication of the organism causing malaria and the automatic decrease of the frequency of the gene for sickle cell anemia which depends upon malaria for its present prevalence. Allison's research is a contribution to eugenics of the best sort, though he may not have thought of it as such.

It may be useful to re-emphasize my point that there is no important distinction between research in "pure" genetics and research in "applied" genetics such as eugenics. Our present day use of the term "human genetics" instead of "eugenics" may be financially and politically expedient but there is no great philosophical distinction between them. Indeed, "pure" science of any sort has no more reality than the "pure" race. Society supports and tolerates what is *called* "pure" science with the knowledge that the useless information discovered today will have value tomorrow. It is comforting to realize that even our mistakes may speed the discovery of the correct answers. Thus not much of our scientific energy is wasted in the long run. However, it would be wasteful to be complacent about our mistakes.

Let me give a short description of the local eugenics society with which I am well acquainted, the Minnesota Human Genetics League. The League is in reality the creation of a Minneapolis physician, Charles Fremont Dight, though it did not make its corporate appearance until some years after his death. This is an unusually appropriate time to mention Dr. Dight because this year is the centennial of his birthdate, July 6, 1856.

Due to the accident of birth, Dr. Dight partook of the culture of the middle of the nineteenth century, and had the crusading fire and zeal of the intellectuals of that time. The questions of those days included the abolition of slavery, Utopian community experiments, the formation of new political parties, temperance, and many social and economic reforms. Over the door of his famous "bird house" residence which was built in a tree near Minnehaha Falls, hung the motto, "Truth shall Triumph; Justice shall be Law", a quotation from a sermon on the slavery question delivered in July 1854 by Theodore Parker in Boston. This nineteenth century devotion to progress was thrown into the attack on twentieth century problems. One of these later crusades was to become the all absorbing one for Dr. Dight. This was the Eugenics Movement.

Dr. Dight received his medical degree from the University of Michigan in 1879. He then served as public health officer of Holton, Michigan. Following this there was a long period of travel in the Near East and Europe. In 1899 he joined the faculty of the Hamline University Medical College and remained on it until Hamline's medical department was amalgamated with the University of Minnesota Medical School. He remained on the staff of the latter institution for six years. Dr. Dight was the first medical director for the Ministers Life and Casualty Union.

Despite the fact that Dr. Dight's salary probably never exceeded $1500 until he was over 70 years old, his frugal living and wise investments created an estate of some $200,000 which he left to the University of Minnesota. The bequest was to be held in trust, the income to support a center for eugenics. He never paid any income taxes. How times have changed!

It is highly unlikely that the Minnesota Human Genetics League would ever have been formed were it not for the bequest of Dr. Charles Dight to the University of Minnesota and the stipulation in his will that a Society for the promotion of the science of human genetics be established. The developments which led to such a unique bequest, and stipulation, make an amazing story.

In 1893 the following circular was distributed: "Your attention is called to the offer made by Dr. C. F. Dight to render medical services by the year. You know beforehand what your Doctor's bill for the year is. You know that in case of accident, or long continued illness from any cause, you will have all the medical attention you need without a Doctor's bill accumulating. You know that your Doctor will not prolong your case from any mercenary motive." Payments were to be made quarterly and ranged from $10 per year for a single person to $25 for a family of four. The world did *not* flock to his door to accept the offer. None-the-less, his basic idea of an annual fee for medical care is also the basic idea of Blue Shield and Blue Cross.

The urge to educate the public in matters of health and reproduction resulted in an interesting venture for Dr. Dight during the summer of 1901. He spent that summer on the Chautauqua circuit lecturing on those topics.

Dr. Dight served from 1914–1918 on the Minneapolis City Council as a *Socialist* alderman from a Republican ward. He won because he showed that both the Republican and Democratic aldermen were dragging their feet on public health matters. He forced a milk pasteurization ordinance through the Council in 1915 over determined opposition from the milk companies. He was instrumental in cleaning up the garbage collection situation and in establishing the present Public Market. Dr. Dight was a liberal in the best sense, and had little use for the many irresponsible members of the Socialist party, from which he withdrew in 1918.

By 1922 Dr. Dight had decided to dedicate his fortune to the cause of eugenics. He was a real pioneer in the field. When he initiated the eugenics movement in Minnesota the national and international movements were still in an exploratory stage. Dr. Dight was a part of those organizations. Apparently in 1922 he obtained the help of the Dean of the Medical School, E. P. Lyon, and Professor Nachtrieb, head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Minnesota, in forming the Minnesota Eugenics Society which was incorporated in 1925.

The first and only president of the Minnesota Eugenics Society was Charles F. Dight. In 1927 a peak membership of 77 persons would seem to have been a sound basis for continued growth. In this same year the American Eugenics Society published a list of eugenics lecturers for each state; Dr. Dight and Professor Dwight Minnich were the two Minnesota men listed. Indeed, Dr. Dight had a nation-wide reputation in the eugenics field. Yet by 1930 the Minnesota Eugenics Society had ceased to be active and had faded from the scene.

Why did this occur? The most important reason was probably that to the public the program did not seem urgent, and the early hopes for an immediate improvement of mankind by simple devices such as sterilization, had foundered. Another reason was that few prominent laymen had been recruited. No social reform will succeed without the eventual backing of some of those who hold the social power. Finally, if an organization is to grow, there must be a paid secretary to handle the details and maintain a tidy administration.

The death of the Minnesota Eugenics Society did not mean that Dr. Dight and his associates had lost heart. It merely meant that a preliminary experiment, for which there had been no model, was completed. A decade later the spirit was to rise again from Dr. Dight's remains, and the Society was to be resurrected.

The Minnesota Eugenics Society existed between 1922 and 1930. It was at its peak from 1925 to 1927 and it was in 1927 that Dr. Dight corresponded with President Lotus D. Coffman of the University of Minnesota concerning the possible Institute of Eugenics which Dight envisaged at the University. Dr. Dight wrote his will that year and bequeathed his estate to the University for that purpose. It is rather startling that none of his other multitudinous interests, such as better training for nurses and other public health projects, were provided with even token bequests!

The provisions for the eventual utilization of his estate by the University were clearly written and at the same time general enough in nature so that they would be adaptable to a changing environment. In return for the bequest the University was to provide academic instruction in human genetics, carry on research in the field, provide a free counseling center for the public where the people could obtain answers to their questions about heredity, and finally to establish a new Eugenics Society. It was no doubt apparent to the University that Dr. Dight's estate was inadequate for the support of such an ambitious program. However, there was sufficient enthusiasm for Dr. Dight's unique concepts so that when the bequest eventually materialized it was accepted by the University.

Dr. Dight did not decrease his personal activity in the field of eugenics even though the eventual disposition of his estate had been provided for, and his Eugenics Society was defunct. Between 1921 and 1935 over 300 of his letters on eugenics were published in the Minneapolis daily newspapers. In 1927–28 he gave a series of eleven talks over station WRHM and in 1933 a series of twelve lectures over the same station. In 1935 the St. Paul Dispatch reported on an address which Dr. Dight gave before a group of 250 people. He was then 79 years old.

Everyone must die or social problems would develop which would seem insoluble even to Dr. Dight. His demise came on June 20, 1938, when he was 82 years of age.

A review of Dr. Dight's accomplishments shows a man intellectually in advance of his times. He was a radical—one who wants to try something new and is sure that it will work while most others doubt it. His idea of prepaid medical care is now acceptable to almost everyone. Few who have heard of typhoid fever or brucellosis would oppose his crusade for compulsory pasteurization of milk used by the public. There are still many who would oppose his crusade for voluntary sterilization of the unfit, and for the fit whose genetics indicate a serious likelihood of the production of further abnormal children. The opponents of voluntary sterilization are more strongly entrenched than were the milk companies that opposed pasteurization but no group can hold back permanently the benefits medicine can bestow.

It would not be fair to judge Dr. Dight merely by the amount of legislation which he inspired, significant though it was. The useful endowment which one leaves at his death is the only thing of significance. The endowment may be a collection of bird prints, good heredity in your offspring, teachings worthy of reproduction, or the few dollars and the small library left by John Harvard. Cash without ideas is not enough—but it is very useful in almost any situation. Dr. Dight left some very large ideas and a little of the where-with-all needed to activate them. Dr. Dight's basic concept that man is susceptible to genetic improvement will not die.

By authorization of the Board of Regents of the University of Minnesota, the Charles Fremont Dight Institute for the Promotion of Human Genetics began to function on July 1, 1941, under the supervision of a director, Professor C. P. Oliver, and an advisory committee. Theodore C. Blegen, Dean of the Graduate School, has served as chairman of the Advisory Committee during the fifteen years of its existence. Two other "charter members" of the committee are still serving faithfully, Dwight E. Minnich, Chairman of the Department of Zoology, and Donald G. Paterson, Professor of Psychology.

Under the vigorous direction of Professor C. P. Oliver the program of teaching, research and public counseling and information was initiated promptly. The first bulletin of the Dight Institute contained a report by the director on the organization and aims of the Dight Institute and a biographical sketch of Dr. Dight by Evadene B. Swanson. This biographical gem has provided the facts about Dr. Dight which the present writer has repeated and reinterpreted.

It was not until 1944 in Bulletin number three of the Dight Institute, that the following sentence appears, "The subcommittee on eugenics societies has been corresponding with various American eugenics societies and is preparing plans which we hope will interest a group in organizing a eugenics society in Minnesota." Outside assistance failed to materialize and it became clear that the precise type of organization which Dr. Dight had envisaged was not the answer to the need. The problems were not as simple, nor the solutions as easy, as Dr. Dight had thought. Attempts to provide legislation regulating the reproduction of the public were not likely to succeed until more research had been done both on methods for controlling reproduction and in the basic science of human genetics. Consequently, the immediate need was for basic research in human genetics and interpretation of the results to the medical profession and the general public. Obviously the first person who needs to be informed of discoveries from related fields concerning reproduction and health is the physician. From him the patient, meaning the public, will receive eventually the proper instructions and information about genetic problems.

It was decided that a modern "research oriented" society should be established without ties with any other group. Public education would be devoted to the dissemination of knowledge concerning human genetics, eugenics, and population problems.

The organization was to be called the Minnesota Human Genetics League. The articles of incorporation were filed on October 26, 1945. The president was Dwight E. Minnich, the treasurer, Theodore C. Blegen, and the secretary, Clarence P. Oliver.

This time there was to be no lack of participation by the prominent citizens generally to be found working for all good causes. Professor Minnich approached the late Miss Helen Bunn of St. Paul, Mrs. Dorothy Atkinson and Mrs. John Cowles, Sr., of Minneapolis, with the request that they become Patrons of the League. They not only agreed to do so but gave generously of their time and energy in the work of the League over the years. Miss Bunn left a gift of $10,000 to the Dight Institute of the University as one of her three bequests for the public good. Physicians and other prominent citizens joined the new organization and have given it steadfast support during its decade of growth.

No provision was made for a paid secretary but a partial solution was found in the willingness of the director of the Dight Institute to accept this burdensome job. The new Society was launched, and it would seem that the pitfalls which led to the disintegration of the old one had been avoided, in part.

The Minnesota Human Genetics League held it first annual meeting on November 14, 1945. It is remarkable that there were forty-seven charter members and that, as far as is known, none of them was a hold-over from the old Minnesota Eugenics

Society. Apparently Dr. Minnich, the president of the new society, was not a member of the old one. Although the Dight Institute and its Advisory Committee helped organize the Minnesota Human Genetics League, the two organizations are legally entirely unrelated. The University of Minnesota had thus fulfilled the fourth and final requirement of the Dight bequest by establishing the League. The University was not obligated to guarantee the survival of the League and it was anticipated that the five officers, who were all University professors, would be replaced as the years passed by persons outside the University. The secretary is the only University of Minnesota staff member among the five officers serving in 1956.

One of the functions of the League is to augment and encourage the activities of the Dight Institute and to interpret human genetics to the physician and the public. Thus while the two organizations are legally independent their programs are functionally parallel.

In 1946 the League suffered a crisis due to the departure of its secretary, Professor C. P. Oliver. At its third annual meeting in 1947 there were only fifty-six members in good standing. It is the secretary who rounds up the new members and prevents the old ones from falling away, once the organization has been established. In 1947 a new director for the Dight Institute and secretary of the League, was found. The new man, the author of this article, like his predecessor, could not devote much time to membership recruitment but gradually the League grew so that there are now about 150 members.

The program of the Minnesota Human Genetics League is concerned with the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the population. Thoughtful people throughout the world are now accepting the related problems of the genetics and the numbers of peoples as the most fundamental ones that there are. It was not always so. The fact that many people are now seeing human biology as the crux of social changes comes through education by the press, radio and television. These distribution mechanisms obtain their data from conferences, research papers and interpretative material produced by organizations like the League.

In 1948 the League helped to sponsor a population conference on the University of Minnesota Campus. At that time it was necessary to show the public that there *was* a world population problem. The League is co-sponsoring a second population conference in late January, 1957, which has the ambitious goal of trying to define what an optimum population would be. Roughly how much food, clothing and shelter, leisure time and community resources, are needed per person to ensure a healthy progressive society?

A study initiated by the Dight Institute and the League on Huntington's chorea has led to unexpected successes. The project was started in a very modest way but attracted the attention and assistance of Dr. John S. Pearson, head of psychological services of the Department of Public Welfare of the State of Minnesota. When Dr. Pearson went to the Rochester State Hospital as the research psychologist, he interested the Superintendent and others there in the organization of a Genetics Research Program. The work started with the help of the Dight Institute and was expanded with the aid of a generous grant from the Hill Family Foundation. The program was centered around the Huntington's chorea work, now to be done on a state wide basis. A census of all choreics and their close relatives has been completed. A popular interpretive pamphlet about the disease written by Dr. Pearson is being used throughout the nation. The League financed the printing of the first 5000 copies of the pamphlet. Efforts to distinguish which half of the progeny of a choreic will later develop the disease are being continued. Movies of patients before and after treatment with reserpine show a remarkable suppression of symptoms, which lasts for at least a few months. The understanding of the mechanism of the inheritance of the gene for the disease which the relatives and early-stage patients have obtained has resulted in voluntary and unsolicited guarantees from some that they will refrain from reproduction and further spread of the dominant gene responsible for this horrible disease. Even a few results of this sort are of great significance to the families involved, to the state and the country. A similar program is now flourishing in Michigan, and will no doubt be initiated in other states.

The research project which the League initiated and for which it assumes responsibility is a gigantic follow-up of a study made of the mentally retarded patients at the Faribault School and Colony. The patients there between 1911–1918 and their relatives were studied with geneological, psychological, and sociological techniques. The follow-up of the descendents of the patients and relatives using the same and newer methods has provided vast amounts of data. In many cases the family group of relatives of the patient comprises over 500 individuals. Every one of the 300 family groups selected for study is different in its display of mental retardation. In those families where mental retardation continues down through the generations there is an opportunity to make a future intensive study, using biochemical and other medical adjuncts, with the expectation that new diagnostic techniques, and perhaps some treatments, may be discovered which will lighten the load of the mentally retarded and their relatives in the future. Dr. Elizabeth Reed has been employed by the League to carry out this follow-up study of the families of the mentally retarded since its inception.

In addition to its research program the League has contributed to general education by bringing world authorities to Minnesota where by public addresses, conferences, and radio broadcasts an awareness and some understanding of human genetics and population problems have been engendered. Dean Laurence H. Snyder, President-elect of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Lady Rama Rau of India, Philip Levine, M.D., Edmund Farris, M.D., and many others have left their imprint upon the people of Minnesota. This would not have happened without the League.

Thus as the Minnesota Human Genetics League completes its first decade of life it can look forward to a highly challenging program befitting its greater maturity. What has been done is a very small beginning. The opportunity ahead is practically limitless in its potentialities for human good.

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Let me add a postscript by suggesting some of the circumstances under which it is feasible to establish a local eugenics society. There are interested and influential laymen in every large community who will provide their support for the organization. Only a few need be found at first, as the charter members will recruit their friends—if an interesting program is drawn up. Your most important function as a geneticist is to think of projects which will advance the science of human genetics and at the same time contribute to social progress in the not too distant future.

There is a lot of work for the geneticist in carrying out the details of arranging for public lectures, recruiting members and in the general catalysis of the society. Such is his fate. However, in return for his trouble, the society does many things for him and his science.

1) The personal contacts with the members are stimulating and gratifying.

2) The financial support of the society for a research project augments the usually meagre research funds available to him.

3) It keeps the geneticist conscious of the fact that he has an obligation to the community which feeds him. A scientist working at an endowed institution is still dependent upon the public, the endowment merely acting as a buffer between them. The endowment is under the indirect control of the community.

4) By recruiting as officers and directors, the heads of medical, university and governmental departments a large amount of useful advice and even free assistance for genetics research projects becomes available.

5) Through its members the local eugenics society is an important and effective way of bringing the new science of human genetics before responsible officials in the state government. The separate governments of the forty-eight states still produce all the laws which involve genetics and reproduction. These governments still have to learn that genetic diseases exist and that the difficult task of controlling them has just begun. The local eugenics society can make faster progress in this educational endeavor than can the individual geneticist.

6) The local eugenics society can easily justify its existence if it does nothing more than bring the science of human genetics before the public by the mass communications media readily available. By directing the scientific output of the local eugenics society the geneticist can repay in part his obligations to the public which directly or indirectly supports him.