The Bookkeeping of Humanity

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The accurate collection, tabulation and analysis of records of births, still-births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and sickness may be said to constitute the bookkeeping of humanity.

The bookkeeping of dollars is very important, but of far greater importance is the bookkeeping of those events in the lives of human beings which are fundamental to an understanding of the movements of mankind, and which are also fundamental to the practical application of hygiene, to secure higher efficiency, longer duration of life and fuller measure happiness. Without vital statistics, a nation cannot know its vital latitude and longitude, its national time of day on the great ocean of time. Through vital statistics a nation is able to know its temperature and pulse, and follow and understand other vital functions. Or, again, its vital potentialities are reflected and comprehensively expressed in such statistics.

To live a successful life, a man must notice the symptoms which forecast his demise, that he may take action to neutralize them or to prepare for his end; and so should a nation carefully collect and keep such checks and balances that tell of increase or decrease in numbers, and causes affecting the same, and which tell the status of social conditions, so that the question of living or dying may be rationally considered. We have this illustrated in the case of France, where lately vital statistics disclosed the fact that the death-rate exceeded the birth-rate, thus forecasting, if the conditions continued, the demise of a great nation.

Human life in its beginning, its duration and ending, is the predominant consideration in all personal, social, state and national problems. The standing of a nation is finally to be measured by the standard of human lives. No thoughtful person denies these facts. Yet, what a surprise it is, yes, a shock, to remember that we ignore in great degree these important matters. We do not fail to keep records of all legal procedures, of all commercial transactions, no matter how insignificant; we will deny ourselves needed rest and sleep to record a little or big real estate deal; we will keep careful minutes of a town meeting or of a social club; yet in many states a human being, made in the image of God and endowed with an immortal soul, can be born and can die without any public and frequently no private record of the fact. However, it is not so with animals and plants. For them, elaborate systems record their birth, entire career and death. Every pedigreed calf, colt, dog, rooster, ram, and even cat, has its birth and death recorded; yet children, our hostages to fortune are born, and fathers and mothers die, without record. The National Government at the cost of millions annually maintains a Bureau of Animal Industry which looks after hog cholera, Texas fever and sheep rot, keeping accurate statistics; it also maintains at a cost of millions annually a Department of Agriculture, which collects crop statistics, beef, pork, poultry and mule statistics, but in not a single place in the whole country do we so accurately know the number of cases of diphtheria and the deaths from this cause among our babies.

Value of Vital Statistics to Medical Science

Medical science, like all other sciences, must, for its development, have coordination of the facts, and numerical expression must be given. In the numerical relations of recoveries to deaths, in the numerical relations of the destructiveness of the various diseases, in the numerical relation of diseases and deaths compared with various age periods, in the numerical relations of sex, nationality, social condition and occupations and employments, scientific medicine finds much valuable material for her advancement. All of these relations and also other facts are supplied by vital statistics. Every true physician is in love with his profession; he would have it make all advancement possible and will always lend his aid and services to such end. It follows then, that for the science he has adopted for his life work, if not in the service of his patients and if not in the service of society, he will gladly and eagerly contribute his part to vital statistics.

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Divorces Going Up

No, we aren’t saying that more people are getting divorced, but the number of Clerk of the Court offices who submit their divorce records electronically are definitely on the rise.

For the staff in the Clerk’s offices, this translates into a real financial savings by decreasing the costs of printing, paper and printer ink/toner, and the costs of getting the records to our office here in Jacksonville. Whether by USPS or UPS or FedEx, the mailing expenses alone are a savings.

It’s not just the convenience factor that is contributing to this increase, but it also addresses an unforeseen problem with a new system recently put into place for the courts system. Following the implementation of the e-filing/e-Portal system statewide, many Clerk’s offices found that they no longer had a “paper” record for every divorce filing. Many couples utilized the services of an attorney who would then file the petition online.

Florida statute requires that the divorce records be submitted to the state office by the tenth of each month for all the records recorded the previous month. How to do this when there is no paper became a real issue.

Not to be found lacking, the Bureau of Vital Statistics implemented a process of importing the records using a Secure File Transfer Protocol server (SFTP) which is used to search the participating county’s SFTP outbox several times a day. When the system finds a file, it moves it to our location where it is processed and entered automatically into the database. What would be a 2-week process for paper is accomplished with just a few clicks of a mouse button.

The importance of the vital statistics to the family, to the state, and to medicine, can hardly be overstated. The physician, the representative of the science of medicine is, except in instances, the only member of society who can supply information in regard to causes of deaths and the presence of infectious diseases. As it is of very great importance to the family that its births, deaths, and causes of infectious diseases be legally recorded, and as the family presumably pays for the physician’s services, the physician, therefore, should not consider his services fully performed nor that he is entitled to his fee until the certificates which are of such great importance are duly made. And again, the physician should remember when reporting vital statistics, that he is giving obedience to the statutes of his state, on which he depends for protection; that he is protecting the helpless; that he is doing a general good, and that he is serving the science of medicine.

Summary Conclusions

The importance of vital statistics to the family, the state, and to medicine, can hardly be overstated. The physician, the representative of the science of medicine is, except in instances, the only member of society who can supply information in regard to causes of deaths and the presence of infectious diseases. As it is of great importance to the family that its births, deaths, and causes of infectious diseases be legally recorded, and as the family presumably pays for the physician’s services, the physician, therefore, should not consider his services fully performed nor that he is entitled to his fee until the certificates which are of such great importance are fully made. And again, the physician should remember when reporting vital statistics, that he is giving obedience to the statutes of his state, on which he depends for protection; that he is protecting the helpless; that he is doing a general good, and that he is serving the science of medicine.

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Editor’s Note: JAMA 100 Years Ago is a transcription updated from articles published a century ago, unless otherwise noted.