

TOO MANY BABIES

All thinking people must be concerned at the rapid and excessive increase of humankind upon the earth so that food supplies in many countries cannot keep up with the number of mouths to be fed, while these countries cannot afford to purchase what is needed from countries where the standard of living and the prices are beyond their means. Even in the wealthy countries there are already shortages of such essentials as school rooms, college class rooms, hospital beds, teachers, professors, doctors, nurses, and technicians.

In the underdeveloped countries these are in such short supply that it will take many years to catch up.

Mr. Vogt in your January 6 number writes; The availability of conception control should be made an intrinsic part of foreign aid. More important than means is motivation. People must be taught the value of a small family just as they are taught other health measures.

Many would agree with this as far as it goes but some important points seem to be overlooked.

After doing medical work in Manchuria and Korea for forty years, and seeing enough of other South East Asian countries to believe that conditions there are similiar, I am convinced that Mr. Vogt's solution to the problem is less simple than he thinks.

First to be noted is the low level of general education. Several governments have quite good health programs on paper. Public health workers, government and mission hospitals reach a certain number of people with their health education efforts, article articles on health and sanitation being published in newspapers and magazines and health instruction given over the radio. But

Too Many Babies

there are villages by no means few in number where no one takes a newspaper, where no one can read, and no one has a radio. How are these people to be reached?

In some countries one can still get in trouble with the law by spreading contraceptive information or materials. If attempts are made along this line, they must be made quietly and on a small scale or meet opposition that will curtail or stop the undertaking. Propaganda by foreigners is not likely to be acceptable unless they have already won the confidence of the people including the authorities, and can speak the language of the country. This practically limits it to the nationals of the country concerned, many of whom have still to be convinced themselves of the advantage of the limitation of families.

Another point likely to be overlooked by outsiders is the importance to the Oriental mind of carrying on the family name and paying respects at the ancestral graves. Daughters, even half a dozen, are useless in this regard as they marry into other families and cannot carry on the family name, while only sons can engage in the traditional rites at the graves. In a home with only daughters, more children must be produced in hope of eventually having a son. If the legal wife fails to produce one, a concubine will likely be taken.

Poverty also complicates the picture in two ways. As most parents cannot afford to support unmarried daughters longer than necessary, they get them married off at an early age which results in early child bearing and a long reproductive period. Again, in the absence of government or municipal benefits to the poor, the

Too Many Babies

old, or the disabled, the only dependence for support is to have sons to care for one in old age or helplessness. One son might die or prove unfilial, hence the necessity of having as many as possible.

In view of the prevalence of these ideas, mere availability of contraceptive information and materials, even if widely disseminated, and even if supplied free, would not likely prove very effective.

Before any such program is likely to succeed, general education must be promoted until it is free and available for all. The older generation that rules the family is not likely to change its ideas and must be allowed to pass off the scene before the younger folk can do as they please. Poverty must be reduced at least to the extent that most people may find it possible to make some provision for old age or incapacity other than progeny.

To attain this will take time. To lend, no matter upon what terms, to give outright, to bestow upon the impoverished peoples of the world the things we think they should have, will never be as gratefully received as sharing with them the knowledge, skills, and prosperity that have been attained in the lands of the west.

No doubt loud cries will go up that we should have to lower our standard of living. What is the alternative? If we do not do it voluntarily, it will come about eventually as the pressures of the world's population increase and the have-not nations demand their share of the world's resources and goods.

There is no quick and easy solution. Nor is much going to be accomplished by a few voices here and there crying in the wilderness. Real action is required. If a moderate amount of the time, effort,

Too Many Babies

and expense were put to raising the standards of education and living in the backward countries as is now being spent on atomic research or space travel, much could be done. But time is getting short. The Orient is no longer content to go on as in the past. They want education and a higher standard of living and until that is attained there is not going to be much success in any campaign for reducing the rate of increase in the population.

China on their doorstep is offering equality in social relationships and whatever wealth there is. When we in the west are ready to grant equality, to share our knowledge and wealth, and to find acceptable ways of doing so, our appeal will be stronger than theirs and be effective, but not until then. And by then it may be TOO LATE.

Florence J. Murray, M.D.