

THE STORY OF BLINDNESS PREVENTION

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The earliest medical records known to us, derived from the ancient river cultures of Mesopotamia, show that even 5000 years ago medical care for the eyes was a speciality in its own right. The Hammurabian Code, discovered in 1902 by archaeologists working at Susa, itemized Sumerian Laws from about 3000 B. C. which included an indication that eye surgery must have been as perilous for the surgeon as for the patient. A surgeon was forbidden to charge more than 10 sheckels of silver for a successful eye operation; but if the operation failed, the surgeon would have his hands chopped off.

A papyrus discovered at Thebes, the ancient capital of Egypt, names 20 eye diseases, and the Greek historian Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the fifth century B.C., met doctors there who specialized in ophthalmology because of the high incidence of blinding diseases.

Nevertheless it was a particularly bad time in human history to be blind, since the most that sightless people could hope for, was to be a successful beggar. There are even undeniable indications that impoverished parents sometimes blinded their own children deliberately to give them extra appeal as waifs.

It seems likely that in very primitive societies children born blind were put to death. This can be deduced from the numerous injunctions in early religious writings to be humane to the blind. But the notion that blindness was a divinely inspired punishment persisted, while only in rare cases such as the poet Homer was the gift of genius proffered as a compensation.

A new era for the blind, the era of the asylum, was slow to arrive. One of the earliest special hospices established specifically for the care

of the sightless is said to have been founded in the fourth century A.D. at Caesarea in Cappadocia. Saint Bertrand, a seventh century Bishop of Le Mand in France, founded an institution near Ponlieu, and William the Conqueror, the Norman king who invaded England in 1066, is credited with founding several hospices in expiation for his worldly sins.

Two centuries later, the captors of a large number of defeated crusaders backed up their demand for a huge ransom by blinding 20 prisoners for every day that the ransom went unpaid. It took 15 days. According to tradition, this tragedy inspired King Louis IX of France in 1260 to take under his royal protection an institute for the care of the blind in Paris, the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts (Fifteen-Twenties) which still exists to this day.

Unlike Japan, where the blind won practical status as masseurs, in Europe and most other parts of the world the blind continued to be regarded as wards of society. But in 1526 the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives wrote a tract on "The Subvention of the Poor" in which he suggested that the sightless should not be left unemployed but should be put to productive work to contribute towards their own support. It was a revolutionary idea and gained ground only slowly, but it marked the start of the third era for the blind, when they at last began to be integrated into society.

Much of the credit for opening the doors of education to blind people goes to a Frenchman, Valentin Haüy, who opened his Institute National des Jeunes Aveugles in Paris in 1784. His success in teaching the 12 children sent to him by a philanthropic society earned him the title of "father and apostle of the blind". After

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