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AN EVALUATION OF THE FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRESS IN THE UNITED STATES¹

By Dr. MURRAY P. HORWOOD

THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ONE of the striking phenomena of the twentieth century and to some extent also of the last quarter of the nineteenth century has been the curtailment of premature mortality, the prevention of disease and the prolongation of the average life span of man. Since 1880, the general death rate has been diminished more than 50 per cent. and the average expectancy of life at birth has been increased from 40 years to approximately 61 years. Typhoid fever and diarrhea and enteritis have diminished almost to the vanishing point in many communities; cholera and typhus fever are rarely causes of death in this country to-day; the inci-

dence and deaths from diphtheria have been greatly reduced; smallpox is under control in all communities where vaccination is practised; bubonic plague, though endemic in certain restricted areas, is not responsible for many cases of disease or many deaths; the infant death rate has been diminished more than 75 per cent.; the death rate from tuberculosis, at one time the most important single cause of death, has been reduced 75 to 80 per cent.; hookworm is controlled in the South; yellow fever is now non-existent in this country; and malaria is under better control. This remarkable progress in public health occurred during a period of rapid and increasing urbanization and congestion in this country, when conditions should have favored high death rates. Obviously, some factor or factors must

¹ Contribution No. 146 from the Department of Biology and Public Health, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass.

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