



# The Health of Nations

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“The exorbitant cost of living space in cities compels people to crowd together.”

**M**ORE AND MORE matters are being looked at from a global point of view and health is one of them. The World Health Organisation and UNICEF are among the landmarks in this trend. When a Hong Kong flu can decimate London and radioactive elements from Hiroshima are found in a Swiss glacier, it looks as though the health problem cannot be stringently localised.

W.H.O. and others are having a go at the world, especially “underdeveloped” countries, with the determination that the most advanced medical knowledge shall wipe out diseases. Will the ultimate that our civilisation has to offer lead to the best of health? And has not the world something to learn from “uncivilised” people? These are among the questions to be faced.

There is plenty of evidence that primitive people lived in a much better state of health before making contact with our civilisation than after, and that we have introduced most of the communicable diseases to them. Perhaps W.H.O. should reverse the problems, take a tribe like the healthy Hunzas who live simply and naturally, and introduce their methods to the rest of us!

Unfortunately, the developing countries become impressed with the outer trappings of our civilisation, and when they become nations they “modernise” by adopting the income tax, red tape and model hospitals. “Health” is seen as a nurse in a starched apron putting a needle into a native.

Certainly in most advanced countries the health situation is far from satisfactory. Despite enormous sums, public and private, spent on health, the problems are growing. Just as we seem to have conquered a disease, it breaks out in a new form. It looked as though tuberculosis was finally conquered, and now it is on the rise again, along with other respiratory diseases, because of the foul air we breathe. That dreadful killer cancer baffles the most advanced medical knowledge, and it too appears to be on the increase. Communicable diseases are especially dangerous in crowded cities. Syphilis eludes the cures designed for it. Mental illness, drug addiction and suicides are increasing in the most advanced countries.

To cope with the cost, several countries, notably Britain and the Scandinavian countries, have developed public health services. But whether public or private, the costs go up year by year. And the problem remains

of providing adequate health services to those most in need of them and least able to afford them.

Furthermore, the impersonal and institutional way in which medical service is dispensed has repelled many in need of care and induced them to seek their cures elsewhere—via the widely advertised patent medicines. There is also a fear that, once in the hands of doctors and surgeons, one never gets free of their clutches—a fear too often well founded.

Just as the health problem cannot be localised, so it cannot be separated as a problem apart from the environment. Progress in medicine is a losing battle when the environment keeps spawning new diseases.

The environment of most advanced countries has deteriorated to the crisis level. Pollution of land, water and air has become a priority. It has been building up for a long time and now it seems to be hitting us forcefully all at once. Exhaust fumes from factories and automobiles have polluted the air. Large areas of land are turning into wastelands and dumping grounds. Mass use of insecticides have poisoned our vegetation, our animals and ourselves. It is becoming more difficult to find clean water. Garbage disposal and a series of oil disasters are polluting the ocean and the life therein.

A great many of our pollution problems and communicable diseases have to do with the over-concentration of people and industrial activities in urban areas. Nature is able to absorb waste products and re-cycle them, up to a point. Beyond that point, the poisons and pollution cannot be absorbed, so they pile up and spill over, creating the situation that now threatens us.

These environmental mishaps have to do with the way land is being used and misused. This in turn depends a good deal on the conditions of land tenure, which should not be overlooked in any study of land use problems.

The high and often speculative price of land is one of the chief causes of the over-concentration of population and industry. The exorbitant cost of living space in cities compels people to crowd together. The industrial and commercial servicing of so many people causes additional pollution-producing activities. Suburban sprawl adds to the problem by causing crowded highway traffic and the extension of utilities and other industrial services. Thus land speculation, by creating a ring of speculatively held land around the city centre, produces a too-high density in the city and a too-far spreading out beyond the city. A normal population

growth would be more evenly spread, easing the city density and bringing in population from the fringes.

The ending of land speculation and the easing of urban density and suburban sprawl can best be brought about through taxing the location instead of what stands upon it. This might not be the final answer to today's health problems, but it should certainly go further than today's remedies which are applied at a rate slower than that at which the evils are multiplying.

By permitting a normal rate of growth in our civilised centres, we may thereby re-discover the natural way of doing things. Although we may envy the Hunzas their health, returning to a more primitive way of life may not seem to us the most appealing thing. Yet there should be such a thing as making civilised progress without increasingly serious breakdowns of health.