

Social Pathology as a Medical Science

| Excerpted from: George Wolff, "Social Pathology as a Medical Science," *American Journal of Public Health* 42, no. 12 (1952): 1576–1582.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL

pathology and social medicine has more and more focused general attention on the foundations of public health and preventive medicine in modern society. The subject of social medicine and its teaching has recently been widely discussed both in England and the United States; in the French and German language areas such developments had taken place some decades earlier. It is worth while to dwell for a moment on a more precise definition of the science of social pathology to avoid all further confusion. By the term "Social Pathology" is meant in this essay the systematic doctrine demonstrating, as far as possible by quantitative means, the interrelationship between genuine pathological conditions of man, i.e., human diseases in the clinical–medical sense and social conditions of the human environment. A short definition may be formulated as follows:

The relation between disease and social conditions is the content of social pathology; its method is necessarily a sociological description of this relationship which, for simplicity's sake, is mostly based on a statistical analysis of the quantitative findings. Its goal is the generalization of hygienic culture among all members of the community and their

descendants through medical care, health education, protective legislation, and other means of social policy. . . .

From the angle of social medicine it is the frequency of a disease and its social–pathological type which makes it a social problem; it is not necessarily a disease hard to diagnose. . . .

The complex nature of a sociological and social–pathological analysis is obvious when we are to deal with the prevalence of disease in various groups of human society. Group observation is characteristic of any social–pathological study and, therefore, epidemiology as the description and statistical analysis of mass diseases is closest in its methods to social pathology. . . .

The remarks on social pathology ought to make it sufficiently clear that a new factor must enter the picture of medical science and preventive practice if we are entitled to make social medicine an academic discipline in its own right, or to distinguish between curative, preventive, and social medicine in the curriculum of the student.

The new factor to be considered is the social component of health and disease, or the relationship between social conditions of the daily environment and health, or lack of health. Such a relation between social

environment and health conditions exists almost in any disease, if varying in degree. . . .

This social factor is more obvious in some diseases, such as tuberculosis, chronic rheumatic fever, rickets than in others, such as cancer, diabetes, psoriasis. To find the varying degree of the social differential in morbidity and mortality, often intertwined with the differential between racial, geographical, or national groups, is the essence of social pathology, which because of its bearing on future generations requires the discussion of the hereditary factor in disease also. This is a new important task of public health. At the same time the quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (social) element of human pathology makes for a clear theory of social medicine, which otherwise is in great danger of being obscured by a vague phraseology. . . .

The creation of health centers for providing all medical services, preventive and curative, to the family as the group unit (not only to casual individuals of the same age, occupational, or disease-exposed group) is another important step in the development of social medicine. . . .

It may be open to question whether in social medicine the strictly experimental method of natural science and individual observation can be applied. In all

social sciences mass observations are the basis of the statistical analysis, retrospective and prospective; in natural science, on the other hand, the experimental method is characterized from the beginning by the inherent possibility of its being repeated at the experimenter's discretion. This is hardly the case in an investigation of given or planned social events. . . .

After this classical age of experimental-microbiological, specific-therapeutic and prophylactic discoveries, which made hygiene—at least in western civilization—a genuine natural science and man's natural environment a safe world to live in, including the microbe world, public health work has entered its third stage. By including in its research man's social environment, i.e., in particular the social conditions under which men are compelled to live, to work, to rear children, and to provide for those to come, public health and hygiene have also become a social science. . . .

By using all medical progress that the modern age has provided and by investigating systematically into the social, economic, and occupational conditions of the groups which constitute modern society, public health work has acquired the characteristics of a social science based on a theory of its own in the borderland between social and medical science. This is the conception of social pathology in the strict medical sense, including social etiology as well as social therapy, which may be summarized in one term as "social medicine." . . .

A systematic presentation of social-pathological facts and their critical interpretation from new inquiries in the English-speaking world is still missing. This task of the future is worth being called a "system of social medicine," in which disease by disease should be discussed in regard to its social etiology and its possible hereditary components. Such an attempt was made in Germany at the beginning of this century by the pioneer of social pathology, Alfred Grotjahn, who . . . wrote the first medical textbook under this title. His *Social Pathology* in its first edition appeared in 1911 and carried the significant subtitle "Attempt at a doctrine of social relations of disease as a foundation of social medicine and social hygiene."

The goal of social medicine is to achieve a generalization of hygienic culture in modern society. . . .

By no means must social medicine be confused with "socialized" or state-controlled medicine. It is natural that social medicine, health insurance, and related institutions of medical care should primarily serve the low income groups and protect them against the unforeseen hazards of life. But altogether, social medicine is characteristic of the trend which modern social policy and protective legislation has taken or will take in any highly mechanized civilization with steadily increasing mass production schemes. The investigation into the social etiology of disease, which is the essence of social medicine, is a necessity in any



George Wolff. Courtesy of US Citizenship and Immigration Services/COW 2006000698.

industrialized economy of our age, be it capitalism and free enterprise, or socialism and planned economy. . . .

Social pathology in a strict medical sense is the systematic doctrine inquiring into the relationship between genuine pathological conditions, i.e., human diseases in the clinical sense and man in his daily environment. Social pathology as a medical science is not to be confounded with a broad description of general social maladjustments, such as the sociologists use in their terminology of broken families, divorces, crime, prostitution, unemployment, war, or other aberrations from normalcy in family life, state, and society. Since social pathology in the medical sense, and the conclusions drawn from it, aim at the generalization of hygienic culture among present and future generations, the discussion