

CORRESPONDENCE

Leprosy in the Solomons.

The Editor, *Leprosy Review*,

Dear Sir,

I have read with interest the summary of the survey of the British Solomons (*Leprosy Review*, July, 1938). I have worked here for a good number of years now, and have a great interest in them and their people. The survey has made us "Leprosy-minded." I have to thank Dr. Innes for many "tips" received as I accompanied him in the villages near this hospital.

May I comment on a few points?

It was very unfortunate that the surveyor found it impossible to visit the western part of the group (not shown on the map on page 124). The people there are of a different type to the rest of the group, are more refined, intelligent, artistic, and supply a goodly percentage of clerks, postal assistants, etc. of the group. The population there is about 12,000, and is roughly one-eighth of the whole population.

Referring to this region, the report says that, from evidence, and from the trend of the present survey, there is probably an incidence of 0.5 and 0.6% in the west. There are no lepers on Choiseul, one of the larger islands. I must say, Sir, that I am sorry to see such definite figures put down. They suggest that the incidence there is more or less definitely established. But this is NOT so. The place was not visited by the surveyor, it cannot be judged from the trend in other islands, because the people are different, and their habits and customs different, and also because the evidence is not correct. The island of Choiseul, where there are supposed to be no lepers, does contain lepers, for I worked there for three years and established a small leprosarium on the island.

(b) Again, too, on this important and populous island of Malaita, where I am trying to tackle the leper problem, the same thing applies. The surveyor had meant to return, and examine the rest of the place, or at least, some further areas, but was not able to. The people who were not seen are different altogether from those examined. Some of them are nomads, others are related to San Cristoval, and as these "unsurveyed" people constitute about 30% of the total population of the island, they constitute a big possible source of error if they are computed on the same lines as those in the north—which they seem to have

been. In collecting lepers for the leper colony, I have found two "nests" of the disease, which, I think, must constitute an area of a high leper incidence rate. The report shows a greatly varying incidence of leprosy in different places, and this is due to the isolation brought about by the constant warfare which has gone on for a very long time, and has separated the areas most effectively. Hence the difficulty in estimating how many lepers one area contains from the number that another happens to contain.

(c) It is very easy to be wise after the event has happened, but, in looking back over the figures, I find the same old factor which robs our surveys of any approach to accuracy. What of the great mass of people who escape examination? In North Malaita here, in a population of 17,750, there were 8,000 of them. The survey brings out the important point that leprosy is most prevalent in the bush, and these missing folks are bush people mostly. Why have they avoided the survey? They know the seriousness of the possibility of having their names on a Government Leper List. As they will hide a murderer, so they can hide a leper. It would have been of the greatest value to us, and to all who are interested in the Solomons, if we could have got some idea of the amount of leprosy, and indeed of other diseases, existing amongst those people. These two, three, or more individuals out of every four, spoil every survey. I cannot help wondering, Sir, whether it would not have been more profitable for a few representative areas to have been selected, and the whole of the population of those areas to have been examined. From these areas figures could have been computed which, in my non-expertness, would have been a truer estimate of the leper incidence than the larger figures which have been collected.

(d) The survey emphasises the point that our natives are much in need of soap, and that skin diseases abound here. This is unfortunately only too true. Many villages are, and have been for long years, placed with an idea of defence and not of water supply, and the top of a hill is not going to abound in water. Washing has thus been a secondary consideration. My suggestion is that with skins such as exist here, it would be impossible, even with more than one pair of eyes observing, to spot every case, especially where the patch is not well marked, or is very early, or happens to be covered with a "calico," no matter how small the amount of covering may be. The survey found 138 cases, and to these, amongst 10,245 people examined, are added 12 cases as a possible error. For the reasons given above, I think this is much too small a percentage.

It is my opinion, therefore, that the lepers computed for this

populous island, at least, can only be a general estimate, and should, I think be considered as a low one.

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,

CLIFFORD JAMES,

Brit. Solomon Is., 24.9.38.