

PETTUS

DR. JAMES W. BABCOCK-PIONEER IN PELLAGRA RESEARCH

Anyone buying cornmeal or grits in South Carolina since 1949 has purchased an "enriched" product. The state Legislature deems it illegal to sell or trade corn products unless the additives thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, vitamin D and calcium are present. The only exception made is for people who grind their own.

The law was slow in coming. In a detailed and convincing argument to the Legislature in 1907, Dr. James W. Babcock said corn was the dominant culprit in a serious diet deficiency which results in the disease pellagra.

Dr. Babcock, a native of Chester, S. C., was a highly qualified psychiatrist who graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1886. In 1891, Gov. Benjamin R. Tillman appointed him superintendent of the State Lunatic Asylum.

Pellagra, with its syndrome of skin, intestinal and mental systems, was first described in Spain as early as 1735 and in the 1800s was recognized by doctors all over southern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America.

Oddly, medical literature, while recognizing corn as a source of pellagra, exempted the southeastern U. S. where corn was a staple from the lists of areas where pellagra was concentrated.

Dr. Babcock's 1907 report to the S. C. Board of Health contended that not only was pellagra present in South Carolina but it was a major cause of insanity among the patients at the Lunatic Asylum.

A care search of the Asylum's records by Dr. Babcock and his associates showed that pellagra had been identified there as early as 1834 by Dr. James Davis, then superintendent. The doctors concluded that pellagra victims had been present at the Asylum from the beginning.

Other studies showed a high incidence of pellagra in Civil War prison camps.

Over the following six-year period (1908-1914), Dr. Babcock observed that 50 percent of the patients admitted suffered from pellagra. Women were the most likely victims. Hospital figures showed that one-half of the pellagra sufferers were black women and one-third were white women.

In 1910, Dr. Babcock and Dr. D. H. Levinder of the U. S. Public Health Service collaborated in translating and publishing the first book on pellagra to be published in the English language. The same year Dr. Babcock extended invitations for a National Conference on Pellagra which was held during State Fair week. A majority of South Carolina's doctors and 120 doctors from other states attended. Dr. Babcock's work received national attention.

The following year the U. S. Public Health Service, along with Surgeon General officers, held clinics to educate doctors attending the fair.

In spite of the advances made in identification and treatment of pellagra, newspapers continued to print sensational stories, inaccurately labeling the disease as both contagious and mysterious.

In 1914 one newspaper account said that pellagra was unknown until 1907 and that the "new menace" was very similar to leprosy. "There are now 600 cases in a single county of S. C."

As late as 1930 there were published accounts of pellagra being caused by the decomposition of carbonic acid in flour. Self-rising flour, "a lazy woman's delight," was thought to be the cause of the disease which killed an estimated 20 percent of mental hospital inmates annually.

Unfortunately, Dr. Babcock's pioneer work with diseases of the insane, which included studies of the tubercular insane, was never appreciated by impatient State House officials. In 1914, Gov. Cole L. Blease attempted to remove him from office, but the S. C. Senate successfully resisted.

The following year, Dr. Babcock, who preferred a quiet life with his family, books and a collection of rare antique furniture, resigned to become professor of mental diseases at the S. C. Medical College, a post he held until his death in 1922.

James Woods Babcock's medical scholarship ranks him as one of the great doctors in South Carolina medical history.