EDITOR’S CHOICE

Pemberton, sex and gender

Why does John Pemberton’s paper on malnutrition in England, first published in the obscure University College Hospital Magazine in July 1934, start our themed issue on nutrition? It provides an important observation: the affordability of even a basic diet is beyond the means of many and this adversely affects their health. It is not just the use of pounds, shillings and pence and imperial measures (for modern day readers, 1 oz is 28 grams, a pound (lb) is 0.45 kg, a pint is 0.57 litres) that has changed since 1934. These were times of great insecurity; facism was growing in Europe, resulting in large movements of population. The Spanish civil war was fermenting. The composers Elgar and Holst both died in 1934, and the HMS Queen Mary was launched. In San Francisco, USA, a general strike led by longshoremen was described by a military leader in this way: ‘When the means of food supply—milk for children—necessities of life to the whole people are threatened, that is bloody insurrection’. However, the strikers maintained supplies of bread and milk to a hungry population. Money to buy food was what they were striking for. In Britain, hunger marches, notably from Jarrow to London in 1936, were common throughout the 1930s. Pemberton concludes his piece: ‘We live in a world where large quantities of food and raw materials are burnt annually, where factories are closed and labour is idle and where a multitude of people are ill-clothed and under-fed’. In this piece, he omits that his interest in social medicine was aroused when he joined a hunger march in London, began to understand the origins of injustice and ill-health as he talked with the marchers, and then experienced ‘a charge of mounted police brandishing batons’.

One of our senior staff in Bristol, coming late in the day to social medicine, realized that he had to get to grips with the difference between gender and sex, as he found he was continually being corrected for using one or the other inappropriately. He confided his aide memoire to me: ‘sex is what you want; gender is what you have to understand to get it’. In this issue, Nancy Kreiger provides what must be the definitive word on gender (a social construct), sex (a biological construct) and their relevance as determinants of health outcomes. Read this and amaze your colleagues with your erudition.

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References
