Sterilization

This volume is a report of a special committee of the American Neurological Association appointed to study the question of Eugenical Sterilization from a medico-legal standpoint. Four of the authors are physicians, the fifth being a consultant in Genetics (Keeler). The book opens with a short history of sterilization, followed by a rather detailed summary of the laws of the various states and of some foreign countries. The main arguments for sterilization are reviewed, some of them being severely criticized by the authors. The data on the inheritance of various mental conditions are critically reviewed. A very short chapter on crime is included. The committee recommends that sterilization laws in the United States should be voluntary rather than compulsory, that they should apply to mental defectives in private institutions and at large in the state as well as to those in state institutions, that they should be administered by boards composed of persons with special training who are legally protected by statute, and that such laws should apply only to selected cases in the following conditions: Huntington's chorea and certain other disabling degenerative diseases recognized to be hereditary, feeblemindedness of familial type, dementia praecox, manic-depressive psychosis and epilepsy. The committee warns against the sterilization of normal persons for purposes of preventing the appearance in their descendants of undesirable mental traits, it frowns on the use of sterilization for immorality or character defect, it urges that environment be not lost sight of as important in the production of all traits, and finally the committee urges further co-ordinated research along these various lines. The style of the book is somewhat rambling and not completely unbiased, but the volume is nevertheless worthwhile, chiefly for its critical review of the literature.—L. H. S.