

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

The prevention of suicide

The increasing prevalence of suicide in this country is a phenomenon of grave social importance. Many of its causes, doubtless, lie beyond the range of either legislative or administrative remedies. We cannot avert the influence of commercial depression or religious excitement or alter the thousand and one climatic, telluric, and social conditions which lead men to take away their own lives. Nor can we return to the drastic policy of earlier days, when the suicide was buried at midnight in the king's highway with a stake through his body, and without the rites of Christian sepulture. But two deterrents might be tried. In the first place, instead of treating attempted *felo de se* as attempted murder, it might, in accordance with Sir James Stephen's suggestion, be regarded only as a secondary offence, punishable by secondary punishment. Again – and the prospect held out by the Death Certification Committee's report, of fresh legislation in our "crown's quest law", gives to this point an immediate interest –

coroners' juries ought not to be permitted to return, nor should coroners be allowed to receive verdicts of "temporary insanity" in cases where not a vestige of evidence of mental disease in the legal sense of the term was adduced. The amiable humanity which inspires such verdicts is worthy of some respect, but its consequences are bad, and further manifestations of this weak disregard of duty ought to be prohibited by law. It may well enough be that the average *felo de se* is not able fully to appreciate either "The Suicide's Argument" or "Nature's Answer" to it, at the time when he lays violent hands on himself. But this is not what the law means, or ought to mean, by insanity; and we see no reason whatever why the mental state of suicides should not be determined by the criteria which govern the question of criminal responsibility in other cases. We deplore this weak sentimentality.

Reference

Journal of Mental Science, January 1894, 63–64.

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