DAY OF THE OCTOGENARIAN

An octogenarian is one who has reached his 80th birthday. About 800,000 of the 130,000,000 people in the country live to be that old or older. But it is not too much to expect that in the years ahead, age 80 may become the rule rather than the exception. In the last 40 years, the average life expectancy has increased from 49 to 65 years. This was brought about largely by the reduction in the death rate among infants and children. In the last 20 years, child deaths from scarlet fever were reduced by 92%, whooping cough by 74%, measles by 91%, Diphtheria deaths are only 1 in 18 of what they were a generation ago. This is real progress in the conquest of disease. The future should see the application of new drugs and new techniques to disease so that people will live longer. Conquering the bugs that weaken and kill will automatically lengthen the life span.

STIMULUS OF WAR

While war has in a measure retarded scientific research, it has however served to speed up the application of previously known facts about disease and drugs to military needs on a mass basis. The results have been amazing. Since World War I, the death rate from all diseases in the army has been reduced from 14.1 per thousand to 0.6 per thousand. Dysentery which was once a scourge is now a minor difficulty. Tetanus, small pox, typhoid and other diseases have just about been eliminated. Yellow fever is nil. Sulfonamide drugs have reduced deaths from pneumonia from 24% in World War I to 1% now. Deaths from spinal meningitis are 1/10 of what they were in World War I. Penicillin has become a miracle drug in effecting cures. Now, what has been done for millions of soldiers and sailors can be done for civilians as well.

THE NEW EMPHASIS

Heretofore, the emphasis has been on diseases of infants and children. That emphasis will and in fact is already shifting to the middle-age and old-age groups. More and more research will be done in this field and slowly but surely the diseases which shorten life will be conquered. There will also be new emphasis on mental diseases. Today there are 7,000,000 mental cases in the United States. They occupy one-third of all available hospital beds and cost the taxpayers about $175,000,000 every year for care and maintenance. There are about 125,000 new mental cases every year. By exploring the nature of disease and finding now and more effective remedies people will feel better and live longer.

FRUIT OF WAR

One of the fruits of war was the creation of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. It was a government agency which marshalled the scientific brains of the nations and directed their efforts on problems growing out of the war. From these scientific minds came the development of the jeep, the production of new weapons, the expanded use of blood plasma, new drugs, better aviation gasoline and countless other advances. It is really one of the little known agencies of the government which has undramatically achieved astounding results.

THE NEXT STEP

Even as this scientific program produced amazing results in time of war, so it could be preserved to bring about equally notable results in time of peace. With the experience gained in research, such an agency could be preserved in the post-war period to give direction to scientific research so that what we said in paragraph one of this column will be figuratively and literally true, namely that age 80 will be the rule rather than the exception. It's a case of conquering the bugs that do the damage.