
WHY KEEP THEM ALIVE?

BY PAUL DE KRUIF

in collaboration with

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WHY KEEP THEM ALIVE?

Books by Paul de Kruif



OUR MEDICINE MEN

MICROBE HUNTERS

HUNGER FIGHTERS

SEVEN IRON MEN

MEN AGAINST DEATH

WHY KEEP THEM ALIVE?

for Loring Ashley Schuler

“There is no wealth but life. . . .”

RUSKIN

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WHY KEEP THEM ALIVE?

CHAPTER ONE

WHY SHOULD THEY DIE?

SINCE the war that was going to end war, the war that was to make the world safe for democracy, during the aftermath of this war that sent millions down to famine, misery, and death, in the midst of this pandemic of despair there has been one thing hopeful. That is the story of a free-masonry of searching men who have stuck to a world-wide, death-fighting co-working. They have stuck to their experimenting just as if life were of all things the most valuable.

They go on working, in spite of our economic order that makes a mock of their life-giving discoveries.

Since that war these men have brought us the toxoid to wipe out diphtheria, no doubt of it. Yet, last year, this now needless contagion killed five thousand children in America. It dragged sixty thousand others through diphtheria's torture.

Led by old Julius Wagner-Jauregg, they have discovered a friendly fever. Combined with a safe, yet powerful chemical, it can guard men, women, and children from the doom of syphilis. Yet this plague is on the increase. Children are blinded by it with no chance of this new help from science. Men and women continue to go mad of it and fill our asylums and die. Its sufferers number nearly one out of ten of our whole population.

Not two hundred miles away from Wake Robin where I write, there is a city where all the science, the necessary hospitals, the expert physicians and nurses are at hand to make

tuberculosis no more than a cruel memory. This could be done in less than a generation. Yet in many a squalid American city right now TB is on the up. Today it is still the chief killer of children and young folks between ages five and nineteen.

There's insulin to drag surely doomed, comatose men, women, and children back from the grave's brink. To give them strength to grow to man- and woman-hood, to work and marry and beget young ones of their own. Why is it that so many thousands can't now come by this strength that science can give them? Why is the diabetes death rate rising?

The cause of scarlet fever is now known. There is new science to prevent its occurrence, and other science to guard against its sometimes fatal, often life-sapping consequences. Yet only a tithe of those who need these preventives are getting their strength-giving magic. Why?

For certain deadly kinds of pneumonia there's now life-saving serum; for all kinds of pneumonia there is now high-frequency electricity often effective against the tight-chested terror. Yet it remains a most formidable killer at all ages, and it's the chief murderer of babies one year old and under.

And even better than curing this so often fatal sickness, there are now ways of rearing children in an environment that might make pneumonia negligible. A few children profit by these happy conditions now. While thousands go on dying.

The riddle of rheumatic heart disease is on the way to being solved. Its microbe's now known. Youngsters threatened by it can now be guarded from the yearly late winter and springtime sneaking of this heartbreak. But this death, too, is on the upgrade. And the children who most desperately need the kind of life that can protect them are the very ones to whom it is denied.

Best of all, and without any question most generally powerful to give death-fighting strength, during these post-war years a new science of nourishing children has unfolded. It is simple. It is easily applied. By its spectacular power a great part of their present misery and death could literally be fed out of young humanity. The new nutrition could people our country with a buoyant, energetic, mentally alert, strong childhood beyond the dreams of the old concoctors of utopias. But malnourished wretchedness among children is widespread, notorious, too terrible for any luckier, well-fed human being to face—and go on eating.

So that it is fair to ask: Should children really eat, and if not, wouldn't it be more merciful to let them die than to live their present half-starved lives?

It isn't as if all this were old science long ago discovered only to be forgotten. It has come to blooming in these very years when it has been my job to report its hopeful story. For it I've been a sort of human loud-speaker, a barker—

—Ladies and Gentlemen: For ten cents, for no more than a dime, you can learn the wonders of the most pain-killing, life-saving spectacle in history!—

So for ten years now I've helped to lure the maimed, the sick, and even those doomed, to this sideshow to see a tantalizing vision of themselves strong-limbed, long-lived, and more and more free from pain. A humanity that might be that, if only . . .

Many have been thrilled by this new hope for life for themselves and their own; some have found that new life; but more have been told: This new life is not for you.

I don't know why it took me so long to see that the strength- and life-giving results of the toil of these searchers were *for sale*; that life was something you could have if you

bought and paid for it; which meant you could have your share of it if you'd been shrewd, or crafty, or just lucky.

It still puzzles me why for so long I found excuses for our ghastly cartoon of a civilization—that's great, as Soddy says, chiefly in its science and treats its men and women of science as if they were not much more than clever varlets; that's ruled by the Calvinistic humbug that God has predestined suffering and that suffering is good; that awards its searchers prizes, smirks congratulations at them, and allots the real benefits of their science to the well-heeled few; that turns its face from millions in pain, or hidden-hungry, or dying with an absolutely possible abundance of life-giving science all round them.

II

Whatever may have been the cause of my ignorance, my blindness and downright stupidity, there's no doubt that what first jarred my complaisant ego was a bitter letter from honest, cantankerous, deep-seeing Ezra Pound. That strange poet had looked into my egotistical story that began with "I don't want to die." Pound pointed out that I apparently knew nothing of a man-made cause of dying that was more murderous than all the swarming sub-visible billions of man-killing microbes put together.

Pound said that cause was poverty.

Then not long after Pound's savage exhortation, I stumbled onto the story of Edward Davidson. With my own eyes I saw how his science saved the life of a horribly burned little girl who would, before Davidson, surely have died. What stirred me most about this remarkable life-saving, pain-killing science of Davidson was that it was so cheap, and so simple, because, probing into the history of his researches, it

was plain that it's poor people, and defenseless children, whose pain Davidson learned to soothe and whose lives he found out how to save.

That was really the beginning of my firsthand contact with the way the sickness of our economic order is holding back, and even destroying what science could now do for us. And it was a great lift for me to find out that the thousands of people who need his discovery don't have to go on writhing in pain simply because they are poor. It was particularly stirring to learn that babies and children—formerly sure to die—can many of them be saved by this curious science in the hands of any doctor, or even any intelligent father and mother in an emergency when no physician is handy, or when he can't be afforded. So for me, Davidson was significant. You see, I knew there was no suffering more ghastly than that of bad burns and scalds, till Davidson. And the torture at the time of the accident was pleasure, compared to the agony at the dressing of your wounds when they were serious enough to send you to a hospital. He abolished all that by his homespun miracle. Before Davidson, when a burn was severe enough to put you in a hospital bed, the chances were about forty out of a hundred that you wouldn't leave that bed alive. Now his trick, used properly, gives you ninety chances out of a hundred to live. It's a break for masses of forlorn men and forgotten children. Burned workmen whose long stay in hospital means increased want for their families, can now get back to their bread-and-butter grind more quickly. Hard-working mothers, without the wherewithal to hire nurses to guard their babies from scalding and burning, now have a chance to save their young ones from the consequences of these too frequent accidents.

III

It is fantastic that Davidson made his discovery in Detroit—a city you think of in connection with mass manufacture of flivvers and with glittering investigators who grow rich solving the mysteries of metals and the whims of gasolines rather than with searchers who stay poor probing into science that gives us life. Davidson was, you'd think, pretty young to make a discovery that demanded a peculiar sort of humility and simple-mindedness. He was a mere kid of thirty. He was not by profession a searcher, but rather a hard-working surgeon in the Henry Ford Hospital—surely too busy with his scalpels and hemostats to have much time for scientific dreaming.

In the whirl of the boom days of 1924, in this city that called itself "The Dynamic," you could bump into a new motor millionaire at every street corner and doctors were appreciated for their height in the income tax brackets rather than for their scientific ponderings. But Davidson was lucky. He was on full-time salary at Henry Ford Hospital, completely outside the dollar-chasing scramble. He was still more fortunate because through his operating room there passed a sad parade of those frightfully injured workmen who were the other side of the picture of our prosperity that was pot-bellied at the top and gaunt at bottom.

You see this was before the days of that money-making science of new lacquer finishing of motor cars and again and again paint-shop fires and explosions sent ambulances clanging to the Henry Ford Hospital bringing men to Davidson—

Men blinded, men blistered over half their bodies, men with faces charred past recognition. In those glittering, hard-

faced, prosperous, and dreadful years few days passed without bringing to Davidson some man groaning with the agony following a gas explosion, or a worker screaming with pain from having fallen into a tank of boiling water, or another unconscious after a horrid bath in a ladle of molten slag. . . . These would be brought, pale and with their skin—where it wasn't burned—strangely clammy, with heart beating fast and temperature way below normal. And now, if this state of shock didn't put a merciful end to their agony, Davidson was puzzled by a most curious succession of events that had baffled all doctors from time immemorial.

To try to still their pain he'd fill these poor devils full of morphine. He smeared them with carron oil. Or he sprayed them with paraffin that would turn solid and so keep their seared and scalded skin from the pain that the mere touch of air would cause them! Now if they didn't die from the first awful shock of their burning, for the next twenty-four hours or so they were likely to get better. But then, gradually—if the burns covered a large enough part of their bodies—a sinister change came over them. Their hearts that had weathered the first shock began beating faster again, and faster. The pupils of their eyes widened. The expression round their eyes was terrified. Then slowly their faces turned a dusky blue and they became nauseated and then delirious and their wild raving at last subsided into muttering and then went silent into an abyss of unconsciousness from which they couldn't be awakened and they died.

Nearly every man of them died who'd been burned to the extent of one-third of his body's surface. The baffling thing was that the burn didn't have to be deep to kill them, and a simple reddening without much blistering was often deadly. What was it that made them die?