The Problems Of Phocomelia

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In recent months, newspapers, magazines and medical journals have devoted many columns of space to the severe congenital malformations which have occurred in great numbers in West Germany and elsewhere. The word 'phocomelia' appears extensively in these reports, but we are not entirely certain that all of these children are phocomelics according to the methods of classification used in the United States. Illustrations from Germany indicate the occurrence of proximal femoral focal deficiency, hemimelia, paraxial radial hemimelia and amelia, as well as phocomelia.

Unfortuntely, very little has been written concerning the positive aspects of this much-publicized problem. The affected children are not automatically condemned to empty futures of idleness and stagnation, as is sometimes suggested. Many can be satisfactorily fitted with prosthetic limbs and trained to lead useful, productive lives within the normal framework of society. This fact is known to every enlightened prosthetist in the United States who is familiar with the methods and techniques now available to aid such handicapped children.

During the past decade particularly, the Committee on Prosthetics Research and Development, the Subcommittee on Children's Prosthetics Problems, the research laboratories at New York University, the University of California at Los Angeles, Northwestern University, the Army Prosthetics Research Laboratory and elsewhere, together with the prosthetic industry of the nation, have cooperated closely in providing improved prosthetic service for children with congenital anomalies. Great advances have been made in the field of amputations and in the development of appropriate prosthetic components and fitting techniques, and new concepts are constantly being introduced. Through the joint pathways of intensive research and increased practical experience, goals which were thought impossible just a few years ago are now attainable.

One calamitous event—World War Two—provided the stimulus for greatly needed research to provide better prostheses for the adult amputee. Similarly, the current crisis may give impetus to the further improvement of prosthetic services for the severely handicapped child.

Parents who are confused and depressed should not give up hope. A great deal can now be done for the child with a congenital abnormality and much more should be possible with a concentrated attack on the problem.