The Eugenics Movement

The term was coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883, influenced by the work of his cousin Charles Darwin. It became a major influence on science and medicine in the early part of the 20th century, and legislation for the sterilisation of ‘defectives’ was introduced first in the United States and later in several European countries. The first ‘Scientific Baby Contest’ was held in 1908, where measures of contestants’ physical and intellectual development were taken.

In 1914, the US Model Eugenical Sterilization Law was proposed to authorise sterilisation of the ‘socially inadequate’ (those in institutions or dependent on care provided at public expense) and encompassed the ‘feebleminded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf; deformed; and dependent’ as well as ‘orphans, ne’er-do–wells, tramps, the homeless and paupers’.

Three major International Eugenics Conferences were held — in 1912 in London, and in 1921 and 1932 in New York. The scientific reputation of eugenics started to decline in the 1930s, when it was used as scientific justification for the racial policies of Nazi Germany, and for its enforced sterilisation and euthanasia of the handicapped (including those with epilepsy). ILAE leaders active in the field of eugenics included Julius Donáth, David Weeks, James F. Munson, W.N. Bullard, H.I. Schou and William Lennox.