

## The Midwife.

### Why the Infant Mortality Rate for the European Population in New Zealand is the lowest in the World.

#### PLUNKET BABIES.\*

**F**ORTY-TWO years ago, when Dr. Truby King was superintendent of Seacliff Mental Hospital, near Dunedin, he became interested in the improvement of stock on the 1,000-acre farm attached to the hospital. Research made him believe that if he could raise healthier calves, he could do the same with human babies, and check the great wastage of life through infant mortality year by year in New Zealand.

After a careful study of the cause of infant deaths, he decided the prime factors were unpreparedness and ignorance of the mother, leading to a decline in natural feeding, the use of unsuitable artificial food, wrong feeding habits, lack of regularity and fresh air, and carelessness and ignorance over clothing, bedding, and home hygiene generally. If a system of mothercraft could be applied to the community as a whole, many infant lives could be saved, and many ailments prevented.

Truby King's seaside cottage at Karitane, near Dunedin, was the first clinic at which his methods were applied, and in 1907, the Royal New Zealand Society for the Health of Women and Children, was formed to put his principles into effect. The organisation is nearly always known as the Plunket Society, after the Governor-General at that time, Lord Plunket, and Lady Plunket, who was actively interested in the work of the Society.

The Plunket Society has since earned world-wide interest and admiration, and the principles of Truby King, who was knighted for his work, have been applied by mothers in many countries.

Voluntary workers of the Plunket Society make themselves responsible for raising more than half the money needed by the society each year to run its country-wide organisation. Plunket balls, bazaars, bridge parties and other functions, primarily organised to raise funds, are the highlights in the social life of many communities. Membership of the society costs 5s. a year, but any mother, whether a member or not, may receive its services. Subscriptions and funds raised by Plunket committees throughout the country amount to about £70,000 a year.

All Plunket nurses are fully qualified for their job. They must be State Registered Nurses, and must hold maternity or midwifery certificates. They undergo a course lasting four months at the Truby King Karitane Hospital, the Dominion training school for Plunket nurses, in Dunedin. There, they gain experience in the dieting and handling of normal, digestively upset and premature infants, as well as in the management of breast feeding. The hospital provides temporary accommodation in the mothercraft section for eight mothers and their infants.

When an expectant mother first visits the local Plunket rooms the 12 essential factors in the preservation of a baby's good health are explained to her. She is told that ante-natal clinics are held once a week. Expectant mothers decide for themselves how many clinics they would care to attend, but most find that at least six visits are necessary to learn all that must be known. Among other things, they are shown what clothes a baby will need, and how simply they can be made from nine patterns prepared by the society and sold for 1s. 3d. They are advised to preserve a normal, balanced diet containing milk, meat, fish and liver, fresh fruit, vegetables and whole-grain cereals.

After the baby has been born, mother and child automatic-

ally receive the help of a Karitane nurse, who advises the mother and watches the progress of the infant from the time they leave a maternity hospital.

There are six Karitane hospitals in New Zealand, which provide for the care of mothers and breast-fed babies, and the treatment of sick infants, and serve as a training ground for about 110 girls a year. Karitane nurses undergo a course in baby nursing lasting 16 months, at a cost of £40. When they are qualified, Karitane nurses go from home to home, helping mothers in the first two or three weeks after they leave maternity hospitals, and teaching them the correct way of handling and feeding their babies. This service, in the case of one child, with the nurse living in the home, costs the mother £3 10s. a week.

A few days after the birth of a child, every mother who has attended a Plunket ante-natal clinic receives a card offering her the services of the Plunket Society. Eighty-four per cent. of them accept the invitation.

A Plunket nurse visits the home once a week until the baby is 8 to 12 weeks old, to check its progress and advise on mothercraft matters and diet. She also helps the mother to plan her daily round to the best advantage.

When visits to the home end, mothers often take their babies to the local Plunket rooms once a fortnight for a routine check-up and advice.

In rural and Maori areas, where distances make a central clinic unpractical, District Health Nurses, fully-trained, and with Plunket certificates, combine infant welfare work with Public Health duties.

Children between the ages of 18 months and five years go every six months to the Plunket rooms for a pre-school clinic examination. Since 1940, the Health Department has undertaken an annual medical examination of pre-school children, and this overhaul is also carried out at the Plunket rooms, by a medical officer, assisted by the Plunket nurse.

Mobile clinics are a recent innovation. In Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin, these units visit State housing areas to hold baby and pre-school clinics.

The infant mortality rate for the European population in New Zealand is the lowest in the world. In 1906, the year before the Plunket Society was founded, there were 62.10 deaths for every 1,000 live births. In 1948, the figure was 23.46. The Plunket Society has played a dominant part in this achievement, and, having achieved its primary object, is now more concerned in establishing the all-round fitness of the 44,000 new arrivals in New Zealand each year.

\* From the *News Bulletin* issued by the High Commissioner for New Zealand.

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