

The Midwives' Bill.

SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE MIDWIVES' BILL,
1902.

DRAWN UP BY THE MEDICAL PROVIDENT
LEAGUE.

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- (1) It is unnecessary.
- (2) It is merely tinkering with a great and important subject.
- (3) It would be useless to women of the poorer classes.
- (4) It would be deceptive and dangerous to those who employ midwives.
- (5) Its details are ridiculous.
- (6) It exhibits a contemptuous indifference to the lives and safety of the poor, as compared with the careful protection afforded to the rich, by the Medical Acts.

1.—THE MIDWIVES' BILL IS UNNECESSARY.

The old dangerous, dirty, decadent, midwife of the past is dying out in this country. Her place is being taken by more or less well-trained Obstetric Nurses who are clean, who know their limitations, and who, therefore, when any danger threatens, send at once for skilled help; thus securing the safety of mother and child. Last year out of 4,536,000 people in the County of London, there were only 366 midwives. Of these, five were over 75 years old, and 78 more were between 55 and 75 years of age. In the County of Lancaster, out of 4,437,000 people, there were just 600 midwives, of whom seven were over 75 years old, and no less than 214 more were between 55 and 75 years of age. It may therefore be confidently predicted that the final Census returns will show that there are not 3,000 midwives in the whole country; of whom probably 900 would be parochial antiquities. It is submitted that it would be ridiculous to pass special legislation for so small, and for so senile, a class of workers.

2.—IT IS MERELY TINKERING WITH A GREAT AND IMPORTANT SUBJECT.

The poorer classes require not only help in parturition, but clean and careful nursing after it. They need, in fact, not antiquated Midwives, but the modern Obstetric Nurse. The latter only forms a small section of the great body of trained nurses who now are at least 80,000 in number, who minister to all classes of the community, whose efficiency is a matter of vital importance to rich and poor alike, and who are now demanding legislation for themselves. It is therefore submitted that it is ridiculous to tinker at a tiny part of a great subject; that the Midwives' Bill should

be rejected; and that the Government should be called upon to promise the appointment of a Select Committee to inquire into the whole Nursing Question, and to recommend legislation, after ascertaining the full facts of the case, which might be of real benefit to every class of the community, and which, in that case, would doubtless command the universal support of the medical profession.

3.—IT WOULD BE USELESS TO WOMEN OF THE POORER CLASSES.

The Bill creates a class of female practitioners of midwifery which the poor do not want. It does absolutely nothing to provide them with the subsequent care and nursing which they urgently require. The promoters of the Bill are evidently ignorant of the fact that the dangers of dirt or neglect after labour are infinitely greater than the ordinary risks of a natural process such as parturition is.

4.—IT WOULD BE DECEPTIVE AND DANGEROUS TO THOSE WHO EMPLOY MIDWIVES.

It places a Government stamp of efficiency upon women who, at the present time, are avowedly ignorant and inefficient. It provides that for the future such a stamp of efficiency shall be placed upon women whose knowledge of Midwifery must be but small, and who can know nothing at all of Medicine and Surgery. Yet parturition involves dangers and results which require a complete knowledge of medicine and surgery to combat successfully. Midwives now work on their own responsibility and are correspondingly cautious. With the fear of the Coroner always before their eyes they generally send for skilled assistance immediately danger threatens. As independent practitioners recognised by the Law, this ever-present need of caution would be lessened; and Ignorance is the most fruitful cause of carelessness which in Midwifery spells danger to both mother and child.

5.—ITS DETAILS ARE RIDICULOUS.

The Bill does nothing more than protect and patent the sacred title of Midwife. It grants a practical monopoly for two years, so far as the granting of certificates admitting to the Register of Midwives is concerned, to a little London Society, and to an Irish College which does not grant such certificates! And this although the Bill does not extend to Irish Midwives! It does not prevent anyone who chooses to do so from practising Midwifery whether registered or not; and it does not prevent any registered midwife from practising Medicine or Surgery. The one and only argument for legislation is that Midwives must be supervised. Yet the Bill gravely places the supervision of these women in the hands of

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