

mission to the Roll of Members is as follows: Candidates examined 453, candidates passed 370, percentage of failures 18.8. We regret that, owing to the amount of space devoted to the report of the Caxton Hall meeting in support of State Registration, we are unable this week to publish the list of successful candidates.

Young Infant Life and Old Wives' Fables.

Notes of an Address delivered by Dr. J. Meredith, at the Annual Meeting of the Devon Nursing Association at Exeter.

The speaker remarked that the subject could hardly be considered as an altogether congenial one, since references made to old wives' fables were usually met by an expression of impatience or a contemptuous gesture. Yet societies such as the Devon Nursing Association must—if they have not already done so—awake to the fact that these fables, and some of the practices resulting from them, have to be reckoned with in the interest of healthy living. He then continued:—

Let me take one example. In the course of my ordinary calling, I have often noticed either a monthly nurse or a "neighbour woman" applying her hands to the sides of the head—and also to the front and the back—of a newly-born child, and press the bones with the object of helping nature to close the "openings"—fontanelles. I always tried to dissuade them from doing so, pointing out that it was risky and never did good. Their reply was that they were very gentle, and that it was always done.

Not very long ago an urgent request came to my house for the doctor to go and see an infant who had been taken with severe epileptiform convulsions. My son, Mr. H. Meredith, rode off and saw the case at once, and noticed that the convulsions were severe. He noticed also that the two parietal bones overlapped.

The woman in attendance, upon being spoken to about it, said she had only pressed the sides of the head "very gently," and was sure that could not be the cause of the fits.

What was *very gentle* pressure to a strong-armed countrywoman must have been a very different thing to a baby only a few hours old. At the time of birth the bones of the head were in normal position.

I called to see these people soon afterwards, and managed to get into a confidential conversation with them. They are intelligent and respectable labouring class people, and kind to their children. They said that they had been living in Devon until a short time before. The attendant woman, upon being asked, said that she pressed the child's head because she thought she ought to do it; she believed that it was always done by every nurse—always done in the district where she came from. The child's mother was listening, and seemed in full sympathy with this view. It was altogether

a new thing for them to be told that they should not meddle in such matters.

One might imagine that these people would not again countenance the compression of a newborn child's head after what had been told them. Vain hope, I fear. The belief is ingrained—old wives' fables are deeply rooted, and are not likely to succumb to a passing assault. A little brain so treated might completely recover, but one can't help entertaining a doubt on the question.

The speaker mentioned, as another sample of old wives' fables, the cruel one known as *breaking babies' nipple strings*, which is practised in many a locality, London amongst others. As a detailed description of this custom has already appeared in this Journal, as well as the reasons given for doing it, we need not again repeat them here.

The result of the manipulations is always bad, at times disastrous, all depending on the force used by the operating attendant. The victims are usually females; males only occasionally.

When these baby girls attain womanhood, and become mothers, the consequences become evident. In the worst cases there is no attempt made at breast-feeding, since there is nothing for the child to take hold of; while in others there may be, and the young mother tries to do her duty by her offspring, but it is always with pain to herself and disappointment to the infant, and after a time she gives up the struggle, never having once experienced that exquisite feeling of contentment and happiness which healthy mothers feel when breast-feeding their babies.

The old midwives and attendants are not the only ones responsible for the practice. A very large proportion of the women who employ them are equally imbued with the fabulous idea, and insist on it being acted upon. They have been educated and brought up in that way, and it is here where the difficulty has to be faced.

How is society to rid itself of these fables and their pernicious effects?

We must not for a moment imagine that the votaries of this cult—for it is in this light that I view it—are naturally cruel or unkind people. Among those whom I have met, no persons could possess the milk of human kindness in greater abundance than they.

In my communication to the *Lancet*, December 1, 1906, I urged the desirability of giving young girls between the ages of 12 and 16 certain instructions in elementary physiology respecting this and cognate subjects. I would here add that, in my opinion, society has, in addition, a great power at its command, but which is now largely running to waste. I allude to district visiting. It is not everyone, however, that is suited for the work, and it may be that an ideal self-effacing visitor of this character must, like a poet, be born to the calling. Be that as it may, no part of the country has better material or possesses finer recruits for the purpose than are to be met with in these western counties.

As things are, it is manifest that there is a world of doings taking place in one section of society which another section knows nothing about.

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