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Editorial.

THE PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS.

One of the effects of the passing of the Notification of Births Act and the Midwives Act has been to make it possible for those who realise the disastrous results of purulent ophthalmia in infants to deal with this disease in its early stages. Liverpool has always been in the forefront in matters which tend to social amelioration, and now it is taking the lead in the prevention of infantile blindness.

At St. Paul's Eye and Ear Hospital in that city a special eye ward has been opened, to which infants suffering from ophthalmia can be admitted with their mothers, and if a child brought for treatment is detained the health authorities are notified and asked to send an ambulance to bring in the mother.

Under the Notification of Births Act all births are notified to the Medical Officer of Health within thirty-six hours, and cases which have been attended by a midwife or a handy woman are then visited by an inspector of midwives. If a case of ophthalmia is discovered the midwife is advised to seek medical aid at once, as indeed is her duty under the rules of the Central Midwives' Board, or if the parents are too poor to pay for medical assistance they are advised to take the child to hospital.

All well-trained midwives and nurses realise the importance of early treatment for these cases, and the great difficulty of getting the necessary remedies applied, in the homes of the children. When admitted to hospital early cases of ophthalmia are usually curable, but if active measures are delayed, even for a day, the eyes may be hopelessly destroyed, and the child starts life with the terrible handicap of blindness, in later life to be most likely a burden on the State.

But the one small ward in St. Paul's Hospital, Liverpool, capable of accommodating only three mothers and babies, is totally inadequate to the demands upon it, and Dr. A. Nimmo Walker, secretary to the Medical Board, appealed at the recent annual meeting for the £20,000 necessary to build a hospital of sixty beds in order that these cases may be effectively dealt with.

With irresistible logic he pointed out the futility of allowing children to go blind, and then building magnificent schools. The public would not, he said, give anything to prevent blindness, but when once the children were blind then nothing was too good for them.

The importance of organised effort for the prevention of the blindness caused by purulent ophthalmia cannot be over-estimated. Such blindness is a reproach to this country which should be wiped out. St. Paul's Hospital, Liverpool, is much to be congratulated on taking the initiative in this work, and we cannot believe that the citizens of so wealthy a city will allow the work to suffer for lack of the necessary funds.

Moreover, what is necessary in Liverpool is necessary in other great cities, and we hope that before long, by the concerted efforts of medical practitioners and midwives, medical officers of health and hospital authorities, it will be possible to bring to light, and treat in an early stage, all cases of infantile purulent ophthalmia. Money could hardly be better spent than in making this possible.

Those amongst us who are acquainted with life in Eastern countries, know how common a spectacle is the blind man by the wayside begging. We do not parade our maimed to the same extent in this country, so our feelings are not harrowed, but none the less a case of blindness from purulent ophthalmia is a national reproach.

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