

The Central Midwives' Board.

An interesting report of its work has just been issued for the first time by the Central Midwives' Board in the form of a Parliamentary Paper (Cd. 4507), covering the period from the formation of the Board to March 31st, 1908.

CONSTITUTION OF BOARD.

The Board was constituted under the provisions of Section 3 of the Midwives' Act, 1902, and its first work was to frame rules regulating the issue of certificates, and the conditions of admission to the Roll of Midwives, the admission to the Roll of women already in practice at the passing of the Act, and other essential matters. These rules were approved by the Privy Council by an Order of Council dated August 12th, 1903, and the first application under Section 2 of the Act, which made provision for the enrolment of existing midwives, was received on October 1st, 1903, and between that date and March 31st, 1905, when the period of grace allowed by Section 2 for the protection of vested interests expired, 22,308 women were certified. On March 31, 1908, the number of names on the Roll was 25,634, but the returns furnished by the Local Supervising Authorities under Section 8 (5) of the Act show that during 1907 only 12,964 midwives notified their intention of practising. At the present time the Board estimate that about 15,000 of the midwives on the Roll are practising as such.

THE CENTRAL EXAMINATION.

The most useful work done by the Board has undoubtedly been the establishment of a Central Examination, by which all the midwives admitted to the Roll have, since June, 1905, been compelled to submit to a uniform test of their efficiency. The applications made to the Board from time to time with the object of reducing the limited number of cases (20) which it requires each candidate to deliver personally, and of lowering the standard of examination, when considered with the percentage of failures (at the February examination, 18.8), prove conclusively the need for, and value of, the maintenance of a standard by an educational authority.

An essential outcome of the examination has been the recognition of maternity hospitals and institutions as training schools, the recognition of registered medical practitioners as teachers, and the approval of certified midwives for the purpose of signing Forms III. and IV. This is by the way an admission that in many—probably most—instances the practical work of the pupils is taught to them and supervised by certified midwives, and a somewhat clumsy as well as narrow-minded method of avoiding their recognition as teachers of practical midwifery. The Board were at first undoubtedly very nervous at giving any recognition or titles to midwives, but they might surely at the present time recognise the work of the women who give midwifery pupils their practical training by some less awkward title than "approved to sign Forms III. and IV.," which conveys nothing to the average person.

The Board has now on its lists 71 recognised training schools (including three in India), 88

recognised teachers, and 92 approved midwives.

PENAL JURISDICTION.

Another important part of the Board's work has been the exercise of its penal jurisdiction under Section 3 (v.) of the Midwives' Act. The method is to ask for an investigation of the alleged offence on the part of a midwife by the Local Supervising Authority, and if this authority finds a *prima facie* case, to cite the midwife to appear before the Board. A difficulty with which the Board has to contend is that it has no power to compel the attendance of witnesses, if they refuse to appear. Under its penal powers the Board has removed the names of 138 midwives from the Roll, censured 43, cautioned 35, and in 19 cases has taken no action.

DEFECTS IN THE ACT.

Various defects have become apparent in the working of the Act during the past five years.

The report states that the most important of these are:—

The Financial Position.

(1) The difficulty, practically amounting to impossibility, of collecting the contributions of the local supervising authorities, as provided by Section 5. It is manifest that the fee of £1 ls. paid by women presenting themselves for examination and certification, can never cover, even approximately, the expenses incurred by the Board. For instance, each candidate is examined by two examiners, 7s. 6d. being decided upon as the fee payable to each examiner. This leaves 6s. out of the £1 ls. towards the expense of printing, cost of rooms for examination, maintenance of offices, salaries of secretary and clerks, heavy legal expenses, the annual publication of the Roll, and other incidental expenses.

Provision is made in Section 5 of the Act that the Board shall, as soon as possible after December 31st of each year, publish a financial statement and "submit a copy of such statement to the Privy Council, and if the statement shows any balance against the Board, and such balance is approved by the Privy Council, the Board may apportion such balance between the Councils of the several counties and county boroughs in proportion to the number of midwives who have given notice during the year of their intention to practise in those areas respectively, and may recover from the councils the sum so apportioned."

The insuperable difficulty of fairly apportioning the balance between the county and county borough councils is that those councils which administer the Act loyally would make most accurate returns as to the midwives practising in their areas, and consequently would be more heavily subsidised than those which are lax—a course which is obviously unjust. Further, if one council omitted to send its return, the apportionment of the balance would be inaccurate, and therefore invalid.

Fees of Medical Practitioners.

(2) The fact that no provision is made for the payment of fees of medical practitioners summoned in emergencies on the advice of a midwife antagonises the general practitioners, and is very hard on midwives. A midwife in an urgent case has been known to send for nine doctors before one would come to her assistance.

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