

The Midwife.

The Midwives' Act Committee.

The Departmental Committee appointed by the Lord President of the Council to consider the working of the Midwives' Act (1902) has now issued its Report, which has been presented to both Houses of Parliament.

TERMS OF REFERENCE.

The Terms of Reference were "to consider the working of the Midwives' Act, 1902, and in particular with reference to the supply of midwives and the cost of training, the remuneration of medical men summoned on the advice of midwives under the rules in pursuance of the Act, and the delegation of their powers by County Councils under the Act."

The Report was signed by Sir Almeric W. Fitzroy, K.C.V.O., Clerk of the Council, as Chairman, and by Mrs. Charles Hobhouse, Dr. F. H. Champneys, F.R.C.P., Dr. J. S. Davy, C.B., Dr. A. H. Downes, Dr. F. E. Fremantle, and Mr. J. Pedder, members of the Committee, and Mr. H. J. Stanley and Mr. F. J. Welch, Joint Secretaries.

The Committee held 21 meetings, at 12 of which they took evidence, and have examined 37 witnesses. Of these 13 were ladies, including 8 certified midwives, and 18 medical practitioners, of whom 8 were medical officers of health, 5 general practitioners, 2 consultants and specialists, 1 infirmary officer, and 2 secretaries of medical societies.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS.

The Committee state at the outset that so far as the operation of the Midwives' Act has come under their review, there has been singularly little effective criticism directed against its main provisions or the methods by which it has sought to give effect to them.

The Committee were particularly struck by the proofs furnished mainly through the testimony of medical officers of health, of the spirit in which local supervising authorities have, as a rule, interpreted their duties. Through assistance given to training, through efficient inspection by means of properly qualified ladies appointed to that end, and through the identification of the work under the Act with the general objects of health administration, much has been done to popularise it and bring its benefit under public notice.

The Committee further point out that statistics extracted from the Registrar-General's Annual Reports show that in England and Wales, coincidentally with the operation of the Act, a notable reduction has taken place in the death-rate from puerperal septic diseases. During the fifteen years preceding 1903 the highest death-rate from these causes per million females living was 202 in 1893, and the lowest 109 in 1898. In 1902 it was 118. In 1903, the year in which the Midwives' Act came

into operation, this death-rate dropped to 97, and in 1907 it declined to 81.

The Committee consider that both as regards mothers and infants a probable saving of life has resulted from the operation of the Midwives' Act, that the diminution of blindness from ophthalmia neonatorum will be considerable, and that manifold causes of permanent ill-health will also be removed.

SUPPLY OF MIDWIVES AND COST OF TRAINING.

The Committee deprecate any postponement of the date (31st March, 1910) after which uncertified midwives will, under Section 1 (2) of the Act, be prohibited from attending habitually, and for gain, women in childbirth except under the direction of a medical practitioner or in cases of emergency. With regard to the suggestion that in sparsely populated rural areas annual licences to practise, based upon a modified examination, might, if a serious deficiency occurred, be issued to uncertified women, the Committee, while loth to recommend any departure from uniformity, think that the matter may be left to the discretion which the Central Midwives' Board are empowered to exercise in regulating the conditions of admission to the Roll.

Concerning the provisions and maintenance of an adequate supply of midwives, the Committee regard this mainly as a question of organisation and distribution, and are of opinion that there is no need of any subvention from the State. They consider that the organisation and distribution of the supply should be undertaken by the co-ordinated action of local authorities and voluntary agencies, and as the most suitable machinery for giving effect to this recommendation advocates the establishment of county nursing associations throughout the country, working in co-operation with the local supervising authorities, and affiliated wherever possible to some central body, such as Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute.

The Committee, therefore, recommend the encouragement of all district nursing, either on the district visiting system, or the cottage resident system, and that these nurses, all of whom should be certified midwives, should be grouped as follows:—(a) Highly trained, fully certificated district nurses; (b) nurses with not less than twelve months' general and midwifery training willing to work upon either the visiting or resident system; (c) trained and certified midwives. They express the opinion that the thoroughly trained district nurse, who will undertake and practise asepsis, is the best equipped agent to undertake the care of lying-in women if she has qualified herself to become a certified midwife.

The Committee desire to lay stress on the importance of fostering any provident arrangements by which the classes among whom midwives work could insure, through maternity clubs or otherwise, against the expenses incident to child-birth.

The Committee recommend as a means of re-

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