

The Midwife.

The Midwife of To-day.

The Midwives' Act of 1902 has now been an established fact for some years, and practical people are beginning to ask what the results are. On the whole, we understand they are considered satisfactory, although naturally there are some few hitches to the smooth working of the Act just at first; and one of the greatest of these, perhaps, is the difficulty that is experienced in receiving an adequate supply of the right people to act as midwives. Certainly it is not that there are not enough qualified to do the work, for we see a list, four or five times every year, of several hundred candidates passed by the Central Midwives' Board, and it would seem that there must be something either in the work itself, or in the conditions under which it is done, which prevents these hundreds of presumably capable people taking it up enthusiastically after having gone through an arduous and expensive training. This being so, it might be well to find out as soon as possible to what their reluctance is due, and I think there can be very little doubt that it is the financial aspect of the case which lies at the root of the matter.

Certainly if the midwifery in this country is to become a serious profession, and is to be conducted in an efficient and dignified manner, it must be firmly established on a sound economic basis, and must not be dependent on philanthropy or casual help, nor be regarded as the last resource of those incompetents whose labour has little market value. There are doubtless many women of sufficient means and superfluous energy who are ready and willing to take up this work for a time, as a novelty, or a charitable hobby, but they are not to be relied upon as steady earnest workers; nor is it right that work so responsible and serious should be allowed to sink almost to the level of a sweated trade.

In the old days the midwife was one of the people themselves, and if she on her side was not required to be very skilful or particularly intelligent, neither did she in return demand much in the way of remuneration. Her needs were few, her way of living humble, and the few shillings that she might earn at a case were, with the addition of various gifts in kind, ample payment for the neighbourly and unobtrusive services she rendered. Now, however, all this is altered, and the law demands

that, willy nilly, the patient must be attended by an educated person, and not only must she be subjected to all the hitherto undreamt of fuss and bother contingent on modern surgical asepsis and sound midwifery, but must also pay this tiresome person a sum wholly incompatible with her station and mode of life.

In order to meet this somewhat impossible position, charitable ladies have combined in many districts for the benefit of the poor people, forming societies which are partially self-supporting, and which engage a midwife at a fixed salary to attend a large district. I have sometimes been consulted about the little difficulties which arise in the administration of these societies, and I find that the organisers are usually surprised and disappointed that the posts thus created are not more eagerly and gratefully sought after, or are held for so short a time.

The reasons are not far to seek, and although we may regret that this essentially womanly work is not passing more freely into the capable hands of those so well suited to carry it on, we cannot honestly be surprised. How can we expect that after spending three or four of the best years of their lives, as well as a large sum of money on their training, highly educated women should be content to live a life of unremitting toil and self-denial, constant strain and anxiety, and be grateful for a bare subsistence wage, which allows of no mental or physical recreation, no little comforts or luxuries, no holidays, and offers no prospect of rest in later years?

Those of us who have practical experience of present day midwifery realise what are the hardships, what the difficulties of the midwife's lot. Her patients often troublesome and obstinate, she must always be cheerful and convincing; working nearly every night, she must be fresh and energetic by day; always on duty, she must never be tired or unfit; fighting against dirt, ignorance, poverty, and disease, she must still be successful; and if, after years of blameless record, and hundreds of satisfactory cases, one should do badly, she must never look for help or sympathy.

And her reward? The knowledge that she is doing useful work, the love and gratitude of her patients, and only too often, broken health, over-strained nerves, and a premature and dependent old age. Is it, then, surprising that good practical midwives are difficult to find?

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