

The Midwife.

MIDWIVES IN IRELAND.*

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In this paper, which treats of the work and status of midwives in this country, I shall devote my attention to the ordinary woman who goes to a lying-in hospital for a six months' course of training, and obtains a diploma in midwifery.

Now the important and practical question arises, what becomes of such a woman after she has finished her course of training in hospital? Some people are under the impression that midwives in Ireland are well off, and, taking things all round, are very well looked after. As far as my own personal experience goes, and as far as I have been able to gather from others well qualified to give a sound judgment in the matter, such is most certainly not the case. That this is so I shall now endeavour to prove. Consider midwives as roughly divided into two classes—public and private.

By public midwives I mean those whose earnings are derived in part or whole from public funds. By private I mean those who depend for their livelihood on the money obtained from private patients. Let us take the case of the private midwife first.

A qualified midwife leaves hospital. She goes to the country and endeavours to get work. In many—and I do not think it an exaggeration to say in most—instances she finds that a so-called "handy woman" has been practising in the district for a number of years, has attended a good many mothers during their confinements, and has been, as far as they can judge, successful. They will not change to the trained midwife, as they say the "handy woman" is lucky. Unfortunately, there is no law in Ireland compelling this so-called handy woman to have a doctor in attendance, and she can do as she likes with her patients. To outward appearances she is successful, but we can see the results of some of her work in the gynaecological wards of our hospitals; and I am sure statistics would show a high death-rate, traced indirectly from different causes, to the ignorance of those women. The end of the private midwife is that she is glad to get anything to

do, and goes out as a children's nurse very often, rather than have it said that she has no work.

I now come to the second class—public midwives, those employed by the Poor Law Unions.

There are in Ireland 159 unions. Those unions are subdivided into 746 dispensary districts. The average population of each district is reckoned at 5,505 persons. Each district is under a separate committee, and has one or more dispensary and medical officers. The number of dispensaries is 1,223. Now there are only 714 midwives—less than one for each district.

The sum of money allotted to the upkeep of the midwives varies. It has increased from £14,709 in the year 1907 to £16,975 in 1910. The latter return works out at a little more than £23 per annum for each midwife. Most people will agree that £23 or £24 per annum without allowances is not an extravagant salary. No woman, of course, could live on it. Accordingly the qualified midwife must try to get a little private practice, which, as I have explained already, is not easily obtained. She sometimes lives at home with her people; otherwise she couldn't support herself on such a small salary. She does not always bother about wearing washing dresses, aprons, &c., as she couldn't afford to pay much for laundry. I think the question of proper indoor uniform being worn by midwives is a very important matter. I have seen midwives in the country attending patients in dresses that they have been wearing for months, and that have never been washed or disinfected in any way. It may be argued they are not attending infectious cases, and don't need disinfection, but that is not so. If a midwife attends a case of puerperal sepsis, we ought to have some supervision over her to see that she takes the necessary precautions before attending another patient. The midwife has also to supply her own appliances, such as midwifery bag and fittings, and here again inspection is necessary to see that they are kept in proper order. The Local Government Board system is very generally approved of, and is quite admirable within its limits.

There is nothing set down in the rules *re* inspection, and I have been informed by the Secretary of the Local Government Board "That each district is inspected annually by one of the Board's Medical Inspectors, who

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