

The Midwife.

THE PRENATAL CARE OF BABIES.

On the important subject of the Prenatal Care of Infants, the *Dietetic and Hygienic Gazette* publishes the following article which is of interest to midwives, who often come in touch with poor mothers before their confinements:—

Excessive infant mortality obtains mostly among the poor, when the prospective mother is ill-nourished or obliged to work during her pregnancy, or when the new-born infant suffers for want of proper sustenance at the breast, or from the mother's ignorance how properly to prepare substitutes for her own milk. The melancholy handicap under which such babies are oftentimes born is increased by congenital malformations (which are comparatively many among the poor), the environment in which the infant is born, and the lack of means for its necessities.

Dr. Jacobi, in his superb presidential address before the American Medical Association, has considered exhaustively "The Best Means of Combating Infant Mortality." He notes that the Committee for the Reduction of Infant Mortality of the New York Milk Committee has arranged with the Russell Sage Foundation for providing a nurse who will look after a thousand pregnant women, with a view to enabling them to rear infants *with improved resistance*. In Boston, the Woman's Municipal League is seeking, through its Committee on Infant Social Service, to provide for babies among the poor a greater capital of resistance. To such end the aims are for more sanitary housing conditions, pure milk, the prevention of eclampsia among mothers, the education of the body politic (which must in the last analysis be the power behind any move for betterment), and the like. The Lying-in Hospital and other Boston charities are aiding in such prenatal work. Thus are philanthropic associations striving to "care for babies before they are born."

The family practitioner may well play a helpful part in this work. Were his admonitions to would-be parents but regarded, there would be better born babies, though the number of them would be diminished. Pity it oftentimes is that one cannot take advantage of the advice of Oliver Wendell Holmes that "a man should be careful in the selection of his ancestors."

Indeed, to fortify the infant against the environmental stresses it must bear and against the enemies, bacterial and otherwise, with which it must cope during its first year or two, we must begin long before its birth; nine months before its birth, observes Dr. Jacobi. In science, birth is but an incident in a succession of biologic processes; conception is but a transmutation of older cellular elements (such as are contained in the ovum and the sperm) into a new cellular compound. And it is essentially with the quality and the virility of cells that we have to deal. The practical deduction would be that those contemplating marriage, who have the sense to seek the physician's advice, should be urged to proceed with the utmost circumspection and self-denial if they are conscious of any hereditary or acquired stigmata. Undoubtedly, marriage, with the possibility of parentage on the part of men and women unfit for this tremendous responsibility—on the part of the nearly related, couples of widely diverse ages, the neurotic, the pervert, the insane, the drug habitué, the syphilitic, the consumptive, and, above all, the alcoholic, besides those whose poverty (with all its dreadful accompaniments) would bring grievous stress into the family economy—marriage among such as these should be precluded whenever possible. Generally speaking, all these subjects are likely to transmit to their offspring vitiated tissues, susceptible to infection, so that such offspring is unable to cope fairly with the agencies inimical to human existence.

We recall that during embryonic life the cells of the body become differentiated and the organs are formed, increase in size, and begin to take on their several functions; that during this period the organism of the coming infant is most acutely sensitive to impressions in utero—variations in oxygen supply, warmth, the constitution of the mother's blood, and the like. Before the birth, then, the mother should be safeguarded to the fullest possible extent for the good of her offspring; she should, even more than in the pregnancies of normal and well-circumstanced women, be assured wholesome diet, sensible and hygienic clothing; should rest well at night and for an hour in the afternoon; have frequent baths in tepid water, and the other familiar measures. Especially should she, if it is possible, be spared unusual care, mental strain or excitement.

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