

The Midwife.

A JUST MIDWIVES ACT FOR IRELAND.*

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It is always wise to benefit by the experience of others, and the fact that England has been the first of the three kingdoms to experiment in the registration of midwives makes it easier for Scotland and Ireland to frame their own Bills, to adopt what is good, to eliminate that which has been proved, after practical experience, to be undesirable. It is with this end in view that I venture to present to this Conference some brief suggestions based upon a prolonged observation of the proceedings of the Midwives Board from the point of view of those lookers-on who are popularly supposed to see most of the game.

First, as to what the Midwives Act has achieved. For better or worse the Act is the offspring of the Midwives Institute, which may congratulate itself, after years of hard work, upon having placed an Act upon the Statute Book which secures these things. The publication of the names and addresses of all midwives who have passed the tests prescribed by the Board in the Midwives' Roll; the admission to the Roll after April 1905 of only such midwives as have given proof of a minimum amount of professional knowledge through a Central Examination; the restriction of the practice of midwifery in England and Wales to those whose names appear on the Roll; the protection of the name of certified midwife; and the prohibition to practice midwifery, under legal penalty, habitually and for gain, by any women who are not so qualified.

The single portal examination, inadequate as we must hold the previous minimum preparation of three months to be, has standardised the education of the midwife and laid a foundation on which to build, and the State recognition of the qualification of the midwife has increased her prestige, so that possessed of that little knowledge which we know is a dangerous thing, she not infrequently gives evidence of the condition known as "swelled head," and patronisingly explains to the trained nurse—who has given three years to learning her business—her professional inferiority because "I can attend cases without a doctor, and you can't."

On the other hand, the trained nurse who has gained her midwifery certificate as an additional qualification to her general training, when asked if she intends to practice as a midwife replies, not unfrequently, with indignation and scorn, "Certainly not!"

* Read at the Nursing Conference, Dublin, June 5th, 1912.

I think we must regard the Midwives Act, with its very elementary professional requirements, its short term training, its lack of representation of the class governed on the Governing Body, as what our American colleagues call an "opening wedge" rather than as the final solution of the midwife question. It is advisable, therefore, to inquire in what directions it may be amended, and what points Scotland and Ireland when initiating legislation should avoid, for it is certain that sooner or later legislation in regard to both midwifery and nursing which is in force in one kingdom will be introduced into the other two. The National Insurance Act has demonstrated beyond a doubt what nurses knew before, that they constantly move from one country to another, and this applies to midwives. It is at present a real hardship to Irish midwives, who hold qualifications second to none, that they may not practice their profession in England unless they first pass the examination of the Central Midwives Board in England or Wales, for there are no examination centres outside the two countries in which the Board has jurisdiction.

The Midwives' Act was passed in 1902, "to secure the better training of midwives, and to regulate their practice"—though it is silent as to the means of securing the former, and practically this has been undertaken by private or public philanthropy. Amongst the latter we must include County Councils, which have, in many instances, granted scholarships for training purposes. It is admittedly an Act in the interests of lying-in women; and the Chairman of the Board plainly announces that he holds office in such interests. Any protection they can obtain they need; but the Act also intimately affects midwives, and no Act can be considered just which does not protect the interests of both the lying-in woman and the midwife. To be just to midwives the Act should, in my opinion, secure for them a thorough professional training, provide for their direct representation on the Central Midwives' Board, give to those midwives who are engaged in the practical training of pupils, the status as well as the work of teacher; and, lastly, the Board, when it sits, under the Authority of the Act to decide upon the removal from the Roll of any midwife for disobeying the rules and regulations which it has laid down, should do so in an entirely judicial capacity.

In regard to training, the quality as well as the length of training must, of course, be taken into account; but the former is protected by the fact that hospitals and institutions which desire to receive pupils with the object of preparing them for the Board's examination must first apply for its recognition. The length of training is of the utmost importance to the quality of the

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