

# The Midwife.

## ANTE-NATAL HYGIENE.

### THE DESTRUCTION OF ANTE-NATAL HEALTH BY SYPHILIS.

In the course of a paper on Ante-natal Hygiene, read before the recent Infant Mortality Conference in London, Dr. J. W. Ballantyne, F.R.C.P.E., F.R.S.Edin., dealt with the subject of the Destruction of Ante-natal Health by Syphilis. He said in part:—

There cannot be the slightest doubt that many morbid influences come to play upon the body of the infant in the womb, and that some at least of them may be prevented or their results cured.

Take that subject about which at the present time there is the most pressing need for frank speaking and full recognition; I mean venereal disease, as it is called, although it is better to concentrate one's thoughts specially on syphilis. It is painful to have to speak of it; it is revolting to have to study its effects; it is heart-rending to watch, as we doctors have to do, its maleficent and accursed mark being imprinted on the bodies of the mother and her child; but it is time, it is long past time, to tear away the veil which prudery, and what is wrongly called common decency, has thrown over this subject, and to show it in all its loathsome nakedness and horrible reality. We are terrified when we brush up against a man who has come from a smallpox patient's bedside; we shudder at the risks we run from the dried up sputum of the victims of consumption which may be floating in the air we breathe; a thrill of horror runs over the whole land when there is news that a case of plague has reached Liverpool or that a man has died of cholera in London; but if we only realized it, the results are far more deadly when a husband infects his wife with syphilis and the misery entailed is infinitely greater. To my mind the most pathetic words in medicine are *syphilis insontium* (syphilis of the *innocent*). Syphilis is sometimes spoken of as a hereditary malady; it is an insult to the name heredity to call it so. It is a contagious disease which, when it affects a woman about to become a mother, has the most certainly maleficent effect upon the fruit of the womb. It is a commonplace of the text-books of medicine and midwifery that when a man infects his wife with this disease there may follow seven or eight abortions (each one of which is of course an ante-natal death), two or three dead-births, and finally the birth of a few infants with the disease in so attenuated a form (the virus having, so to say, tired itself out) that they may continue to live for some years a damaged existence in the world.

No wonder Fournier has been stung into using the expression "horrible mortuary tables" to describe the statistics of ante-natal syphilis. One cannot use the words ante-natal hygiene when one or other, or both, parents are suffering from syphilis; there can be no such thing as hygiene then.

But if syphilis be the most potent of all the causes of ante-natal death and disease, it is in connection with it also that there comes the most hopeful outlook for treatment, preventive and curative. The cause of it, the *Spirochaeta pallida*, is among the most easily recognized of microbes, and there is a blood test of the presence of the disease which is reliable (the Wassermann reaction); so the malady can be easily diagnosed both after death and during life. Then, again, there are medicines (such as mercury and arsenic) which are effective in cutting short the malady's dire course; and these when given to the expectant mother avail for the infected child in her womb; there is no kind of ante-natal treatment more hopeful than that of syphilis of the unborn infant. But these are not the only things which should be and which may be done. With the triumphs of preventive medicine all around us, with typhus practically unknown now, with typhoid fever checked, with the sting taken out of diphtheria, with smallpox so rare as to be almost unseen by the present generation of medical practitioners, with Malta fever banished with the infected goats which harboured its cause, with tuberculosis giving way before the regimen of the open window, with all these beneficent advances made or in the making, it is surely not beyond the wit of man to devise means for the prevention of syphilis. The greatest possible forward movement at the present time in ante-natal hygiene is the detection of syphilis and the prevention of its spread. It is even more important than the control of alcoholism. So enormous are the advantages which will accrue from its eradication that it is not too much to hope for the time when every parent will demand from a prospective son-in-law a pre-nuptial certificate of good health,

### ADVANCES IN ANTE-NATAL HYGIENE.

Now let me indicate, necessarily in the fewest words, some of the ways in which ante-natal hygiene may be fostered and the health of the unborn infant secured.

In the first place it is essential that authoritative facts regarding the amount of ante-natal disease and death be forthcoming; we must get to know the strength of the foe with whom we are fighting. This means the introduction of compulsory registration of stillbirths, and, if means can be devised, of abortions as well. It has been

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)