

## The Midwife.

### THE EMPLOYMENT OF PREGNANT WOMEN IN MUNITION FACTORIES.

The question of legislation prohibiting pregnant women from wage earning within a certain time, both before and after their confinements, is one which should be approached with extreme caution. Dr. Mary S. Deacon, in a paper read at the Oxford Welfare Conference last month, shows how, far from having a prejudicial effect on the health of the mother, work is beneficial to her.

Dr. Deacon writes, in part:—

"The factory from which the following report was compiled is built on the site of a farm, in flat, open and well-drained fields; there is an abundance of fresh air and sunshine. All the buildings are very well ventilated with cross and end-to-end through draughts, and the sanitary and bath accommodation is in excess of the Home Office requirements. The factory is particularly well managed; the canteen is good; the factory clothes are most suitable and made so as entirely to cover all the worker's private clothes.

"The factory is situated a mile from the station and tram terminus, and all workers have of necessity to walk this mile as there is no other way of reaching their work. The exercise is most salutary for them, and it is surprising to see the difference in their general appearance noticeable after about six weeks' work with us.

"A covered way is provided alongside the roadway for protection in rough weather, and this pathway has been well rolled so that it is always firm and dry.

"Our workers are of the usual city type—undersized, badly developed, with very bad teeth and often anæmic. About 50 per cent. are married and often these have their household duties to attend to after they get home at night. In spite of these drawbacks, after about six weeks' work—and hard work too—if they have the grit to stick it, they become more robust, less anæmic and much more healthy-looking in every way. I consider that this improvement is due to healthy exercise, well-disciplined work, the good and abundant food supplied in the canteen at moderate price, and above all to the abundance of fresh air which they are obliged to get when working in this factory. The fresh air and hard work make them hungry, and getting good money they can well afford to obtain sufficient food. During their meal hour they have amusement, some days they dance and on others concerts are arranged. All workers are medically examined before being engaged, and if found suitable but with bad teeth these are extracted by the factory dentist before work is actually started.

"During the nine months—June 1st, 1917, to February 28th, 1918—I have kept records with a view to finding out the effect of the work on any woman who may become pregnant. Of the total

number of women workers engaged in that period (1,197), 575 were married and 622 single. The married women have been brought into the labour market for various reasons. Munitions factories have given them their opportunity and factory managers have no alternative but to engage them."

She then sets out the nature of the problem, and discusses it from the point of view of efficiency, the workers' point of view, and the question of maternal welfare.

#### THE WORKERS' POINT OF VIEW.

In regard to the workers' point of view, Dr. Deacon says:—

"From the workers' point of view it seems to me that most arguments must be entirely in favour of being kept on. The most cogent reasons are:—

"(a) The worker should not be turned away from work that she is quite able and competent to do because of her condition, excepting in cases where the work is very heavy, but as in our factory (and also, I should think, in most other factories) there is alternation of work, and as the same woman may do various kinds of work, some suitable employment can usually be found for her.

"(b) The worker will not be tempted to take drugs or to use other means to provoke miscarriage if she is free from the fear of losing work where she can earn a good wage, and being obliged either to drop out of the labour market altogether or to take on duller and less highly paid work because she cannot do without the money. I have heard of cases in which the worker, when dismissed from a factory because of her condition, has, in order to obtain bare necessities, gone rag-picking on some refuse heap and got into such a bad condition that both she and the child have been in great danger at the time of the actual confinement.

"(c) If the worker continues at her more highly paid work she can afford to save money for the time during which she will be laid by, and can also probably then afford to take a longer interval after the confinement, when the rest is all-important both to herself and the child.

"(d) During the pre-confinement period, if she earns good money, she can enjoy the better food which is so necessary to her condition. She shares the company and fellowship of her companions, so necessary to keep her cheerful, and by walking a mile to work obtains plenty of exercise and fresh air. The maintenance of the mother in a fit state of health and spirits is all-important to the health of the child to which she is to give birth. Several of the workers are reported as never having felt so well during former pregnancies or having had such good confinements or such healthy babies. In no case has the actual nature of their employment had the slightest detrimental effect."

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)