

# The Midwife.

## A LOOPHOLE IN THE MIDWIVES ACT.

Dr. R. J. Maule Horne, M.A., Ch.B., B.Sc., D.P.H., Medical Officer of Health at Poole, who read a paper on the above subject at the recent Congress of the Royal Sanitary Institute, at Bournemouth, said in part:—

In the course of routine work connected with Maternity and Child Welfare in my borough I was struck by the number of cases which came to my notice—without any special enquiries—where mothers had been attended at the birth of a child, by an uncertified and unqualified "maternity nurse" only—no doctor being present at the actual birth of the child (child birth).

The names associated with the cases in my file are:

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| (1) Mrs. "A" .. .. | 3 cases. |
| (2) Mrs. "B" .. .. | 2 cases. |
| (3) Mrs. "C" .. .. | 2 cases. |
| (4) Mrs. "D" .. .; | 3 cases. |
| (5) Mrs. "E" .. .. | 2 cases. |

Mrs. "A" was also associated with a case in March, 1920, which resulted in the mother's death from a complication of pregnancy (pelvic peritonitis).

Of the above quoted instances, (1) in Mrs. "A's" practice, one mother developed *puerperal fever*—an avoidable and very serious illness; (2) in Mrs. "B's" practice, one mother developed *puerperal fever* and died; (3) in Mrs. "C's" practice, one infant developed ophthalmia neonatorum.

It is assumed that the other cases above progressed normally.

A third case of *puerperal fever* (fatal) has lately occurred where the maternity nurse, "Mrs. B" was working in conjunction with a doctor. This case is, I understand, still *sub judice*.

The outstanding fact is that of fourteen cases of childbirth with which the "maternity nurses" have been associated (in two of which a doctor was also in attendance): Three cases of *puerperal fever*, with two deaths; one case of pelvic peritonitis, with one death; and one ascertained case of ophthalmia neonatorum have resulted.

This is an intolerable situation from the point of view of public health—that three out of fourteen women of child-bearing age should lose their lives in this manner.

Points and questions which arise in this connection are:—

What constitutes (under Sec. 1 (2) Midwives Act, 1902), the expression "under the direction of a qualified medical practitioner"?

If a doctor accept attendance on a case of labour in conjunction with an uncertified "maternity nurse"—where no midwife is engaged, and knowing this—is he to be expected to make a special point of being present at the time of birth?

If he does not do this, then he would appear to

be treating the "maternity nurse" as a midwife, as any action of a midwife taken by the "nurse" could not be construed to be taken in "emergency" (Sec. 1 (2)).

In a case of puerperal fever or any other condition supposed to be infectious, a "midwife" is under an obligation (C.M.B. Rules E. 6 and E. 23) which prevent her going to another engagement until sanctioned by the Local Supervising Authority.

In a similar case where an unqualified woman is in attendance, this woman is in a position to spread such an infection unwittingly. . . . The governing rules do not safeguard the public in this respect.

It was hoped that in course of time the *bona fide* midwife would cease to be, and the certified midwife would have a fair field for her energies, but it would appear that there is a danger of the "maternity nurse" taking the place of the *bona fide* midwife.

There is no advantage to be gained by shutting our eyes to facts. If the "maternity nurse" is not better controlled, if the interpretation of the term "under the direction of a qualified medical practitioner" is not made so clear that there can be no room for equivocation on the part either of the medical practitioner or of the "maternity nurse," there is a real possibility of the main purpose of the Act being stultified, as now the uncertified woman may have the opportunity of carrying on a "practice" without the use of the term "midwife."

## THE MIDWIVES' ROLL.

The Ministry of Health, in the Third Annual Report of the Ministry of Health, 1921-1922, to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, states that of the 48,618 women on the Midwives Roll (covering the whole of England and Wales), 12,052 gave notice of intention to practise as midwives in 1921. Eighty-two per cent. of the total on the Roll are now certificated.

In 1920, the last year for which figures are available, the percentage of births notified by midwives was 47.7 in London, 66.9 in the County Boroughs, and 47.1 in the Counties.

The Department has continued to encourage Local Authorities to secure a complete service of competent midwives for their districts.

## PRIMEVAL FETISH.

An appeal to mothers to cease the practice, prevalent in the district, of cutting babies' ears at the waning of the moon has been made by Dr. David Arthur Hughes, Medical Officer of Health for Carmarthenshire.

He described the practice as a primeval fetish.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)