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EDITORIAL.

THE ECONOMIC BURDEN OF ILLEGITIMACY.

The question of the relative responsibility of the parents for the maintenance of an illegitimate child is one which is arousing considerable attention at the present time. Two Bills dealing with the Children of Unmarried Parents have been before Parliament in successive years, one introduced by Mr. Neville Chamberlain, the other by Captain Bowyer. The latter passed through all its stages in the House of Commons, but legal questions, in regard to succession, delayed it in the House of Lords for so long that time failed for it to become law.

The late Government, realising the public support behind it, promised to introduce a Bill of its own on the subject, but went out of office before this was done.

It remains, therefore, to be seen what action the present Government will take, and the fact that the Home Secretary has consented to receive a deputation in regard to the "Children of Unmarried Parents Bill," on January 25th, organised by the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, and including representatives of the Labour Party and a number of important societies, indicates that the Government—as well as the community—is alive to the importance of the question.

The *Times*, in a reasoned article, discusses the whole question, of which there are many aspects. It should be realised that the death rate among illegitimate children is at least twice as high as that among the legitimate, and the damage rate is in proportion.

Our contemporary states that "the fundamental reason for the suffering and dying amongst these babies is the fact that from the moment the mother knows that her child is coming into the world she is anxious, unhappy, overcome by every kind of trouble—emotional, physical, and economic. She may lose her work—she will certainly lose it when the child is born—and she may not be able to regain it. The policy we have adopted in our

laws, in our administration, in our whole outlook, is to make the mother solely responsible for her illegitimate child. . . . It needs but little knowledge or imagination to realise the almost insuperable difficulty of her task."

Of these factors the economic one is unquestionably the most important. We think our contemporary over-states the emotional and physical ones. In the case of a first baby they may sometimes have an important bearing; even then it must be remembered that Nature looks after the coming child at the expense of the mother; that illegitimate children are usually born perfect and healthy; that in a number of cases the mother, whose sensibilities are blunt, does not feel shame or unhappiness, but she undoubtedly does feel the economic burden and inconvenience of the child when born. We believe that lack of mothering, and neglect after birth, are largely responsible for the high illegitimate death-rate. A child thrives in an atmosphere of affection: it wilts without it; and it must be remembered that an illegitimate child is usually an unwanted child.

It is undoubtedly unfair that the whole economic burden of a child's maintenance should fall upon the mother, and only just that it should be divided more evenly between the parents. Here again there is the difficulty of fixing, with certainty, the responsibility for fatherhood; but if it is known that the father will be held legally responsible as well as the mother for the maintenance of their child, irresponsible fatherhood may, to some extent, be discouraged.

The duty of the State to safeguard the interests of illegitimate children is undoubted; helpless and undesired, they are peculiarly in need of its protection. None know better than trained nurses and midwives the disabilities and dangers to which the illegitimate child is subjected, and none will more cordially support legislation designed to ameliorate its condition. The legitimatising of children born out of wedlock whose parents marry subsequently, would be a step in the right direction.

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