

THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED
THE NURSING RECORD

EDITED BY MRS. BEDFORD FENWICK, REGISTERED NURSE.

No. 1,935. Vol. 77

OCTOBER, 1929.

Price Sevenpence

EDITORIAL.

A GREAT OPPORTUNITY MISSED.

The Report of the Departmental Committee on the Training and Employment of Midwives appointed by the late Minister of Health has now been submitted by the Chairman, Sir Robert Bolam, O.B.E., Hon. LL.D., M.D., F.R.C.P., and the Committee, to the Right Hon. Arthur Greenwood, Minister of Health, and is available to the public. We refer to it briefly on page 286.

The Committee were instructed:—

"To consider the working of the Midwives Acts, 1902-1926, with particular reference to the training of midwives (including its relation to the education of medical students in midwifery) and the conditions under which midwives are employed."

It will be remembered that the Committee when constituted included no Registered Nurse-Midwife. That the attention of the Minister of Health—at that time the Right Hon. Neville Chamberlain, M.P.—was directed to this serious omission by the Royal British Nurses' Association and the British College of Nurses, and that he persistently refused to rectify it. The consequence was that when the Committee considered the evidence of the 74 witnesses who appeared before it, not one of their number was able to weigh it and represent its significance, from the point of view of the highly skilled worker holding the dual qualification of State Registered Nurse and Certified Midwife, who more than anyone else can influence the mortality rate of women in childbirth, and whose sympathy and help must be enlisted if a successful attempt is to be made to grapple with this serious problem.

It is not too much to say that the Ministry of Health in the late dispensation was distinctly unsympathetic with the professional opinions and aspirations of Registered Nurses, and that attitude would certainly appear to be the one adopted by the Departmental Committee, which has informed the Minister that, in its opinion, "the time is not opportune to restrict entrance to the (midwifery) profession to women who hold the general nursing qualification," also that those who qualify as certified midwives without intending to put such training to practical use fall into two main classes.

"Firstly, there are those who require the certificate of the Central Midwives Board in order to be eligible for appointment as health visitor, and, secondly, there are those who having secured the general nursing qualification acquire the midwifery certificate more or less as an ornament to enhance their prospects of advancement in the various branches of nursing work. It is understood, for example, that many of the highest positions in the nursing world and a large number of

positions abroad, require the applicant to be a certified midwife, and that in the majority of these posts there is no reason to anticipate that the holder will ever be called upon to put into action the knowledge of midwifery she has gained."

A committee with this outlook cannot be expected to make any useful recommendation in regard to the importance of Registered Nurses in any scheme for the creation of a better-trained body of midwives to which they hold the key.

The Lancet, in an able leading article entitled "The Training of Midwives," in which it discusses the Report of the Departmental Committee, thus sums it up, concisely:—

"The fact that 'the midwife occupies an exceptionally responsible position . . . compared with women employed in allied branches of nursing' is admitted by the Committee, who, nevertheless, believe that the time has not yet come either to increase the length of the midwife's special training or to require a preliminary training or experience in general nursing."

"Fundamental alterations in an established system cannot be made in a day, but the Committee have missed a great opportunity of pointing out the directions in which the evolution of the midwife's training should be led, and the ideals which should be kept in view. The chief ideal is to provide for the country a body of midwives worthy to form the basis of a national scheme, composed of educated and highly trained women, animated by the esprit de corps of an honourable profession, and adequately remunerated for their work. Only in proportion as some such ideal as this is attained will a national scheme yield the expected result. One step towards this end would be to give midwives a larger share in the management of their own profession, thus developing their sense of responsibility and of the dignity of their work. The administrative changes proposed in the report tend, however, in the opposite direction. Generally speaking, the changes would place the midwives' profession under the control of medical officers of health and nominees of the Ministry, to the practical exclusion of practising midwives and teachers of obstetrics. The most alarming of the administrative changes proposed are indeed those aimed at the weakening of the Central Midwives Board. The main objections to these proposals are clearly set out in the Memorandum of Reservation, signed by Mrs. Bruce Richmond and Dr. J. S. Fairbairn. We trust that this Memorandum will be carefully considered before any decision is taken to limit the scope of a body which has done invaluable public service in the past, and which, if it were made more fully representative and given wider powers, would be in a position to do still more useful work in the future."

previous page

next page