

Report of the Ministry of Health.*

For the Year ended March 31st, 1949.

NEW LOW RECORDS in health statistics were set up in 1948—a year also made notable by the inauguration of the National Health Service.

The National Health Service was inaugurated on July 5th, 1948; of its early months the Minister (Mr. Aneurin Bevan) says, "Since its inception the Health Service has been subjected to sustained scrutiny both at home and abroad—indeed, it has excited world-wide attention—and the demands made upon it during the first nine months of its existence have in some directions severely taxed its strength and capacity. This has been a testing time, but it has proved that the structure of the Service is generally sound and that the foundations have been securely laid."

The Chief Medical Officer (Sir Wilson Jameson) describes the vital statistics as "wonderful." A total death rate of 10.8 with a civilian death rate of 11.0, both the lowest on record, gave a smaller number of deaths than any year since 1930, when there were 3,000,000 fewer people in the country. Compared with 1938 (which had the lowest standardised mortality of any year before the second world war) the mortality index at all ages showed a 20 per cent. decline. There were striking reductions in deaths from a number of diseases.

PART I

Centenary of the Public Health Service.

The year 1948, by its remarkable vital statistics and by the coming into force of the National Health Service, fittingly commemorated the celebrations marking the first hundred years of the Public Health Service. The first Public Health Act was passed in 1848.

The year enjoyed the sequence of a fine warm winter, a lovely spring, a cool wet August and an exceptionally mild autumn. These climatic factors, and the absence of influenza, combined to make the vital statistics of the year memorable. A total death rate of 10.8 per 1,000 and a civilian death rate of 11.0, both the lowest on record, gave a smaller number of deaths than in any year since 1930, when there were 3,000,000 fewer people in the country.

Decline in Mortality.—Dr. Percy Stocks, Chief Medical Statistician of the General Register Office, compares the vital statistics of 1948 with those of 1938, the last full year of peace, and that which had the lowest standardised mortality of any year before the second world war. He shows how great during these ten years has been the fall in death rates at almost every period of life. The relative decrease is greatest at ages 5–10 (59.9 per cent.) and next greatest at 10–15 (50 per cent.), school children's death rates being less than half of what they were ten years ago. At ages under five, the decrease was 43 per cent., for adolescents (15 to 20) 35 per cent., and, at 20 to 25, it was 44 per cent. for men and 31 per cent. for women. Even at ages over 75, in which only slight falls had occurred between 1938 and 1947, the death rates fell sharply in 1948 for each sex.

The comparative mortality index at all ages (which allows for the changing age constitution) showed a 20 per cent. decline, somewhat greater for females than for males.

Among the principal causes of death the two showing the most pronounced falls were influenza and enteritis and diarrhoea, the latter less than half the average over many years. The case-fatality of measles and whooping cough, though both were very prevalent, fell to record low levels.

There were marked reductions in deaths from cerebro-

spinal fever, diphtheria, nervous diseases, bronchitis, pneumonia and infantile diseases. The comparative mortality indices (1938 unit) for tuberculosis were 0.826 (all forms) and 0.862 (respiratory); for pneumonia 0.525 and for diabetes 0.567.

The vital statistics of mothers and infants.—The birth rate (17.8), though lower than 1946 and 1947 was well above the other mean annual rates since 1931. Despite this high birth rate and all the pressure on maternity staff and accommodation, infant mortality fell by as much as 17 per cent. from 1947 (itself a low record) to 34 per 1,000.

In 1938, it was 53, and the 1948 rate is only 22 per cent. of what it was 50 years ago. The neonatal death rate and the infant death rate due to premature birth both fell substantially to make further low records, and the still-birth rate of 23.2 per 1,000 total births was yet another low record, while among children from one to five years new low records were made at each year of age.

Infectious Diseases.

Influenza.—The outstanding feature here was the phenomenal absence of epidemic influenza.

There was no importation of smallpox. An alarming decline in infant vaccination has occurred following the operation of Section 26 of the National Health Service Act, which repealed the Vaccination Acts, and it is estimated that during the second half of 1948 less than 20 per cent. of infants were primarily vaccinated. Sir Wilson Jameson urges family doctors to do their utmost to correct this serious gap in our defences against smallpox and again points out the advantages of the multiple pressure method of vaccination.

Diphtheria: Success of the Immunisation Campaign.—Notifications and deaths have been reduced to less than a tenth of those in the best of the years before the campaign began.

The figures for diphtheria immunisation showed a gratifying improvement. The number of immunisations in children under 15 years of age rose from 589,343 in 1947 to 702,744 in 1948 and in addition 490,383 children received a reinforcing injection. A concentrated effort is now needed to obtain a higher rate of primary immunisation before the first birthday and periodic reinforcing inoculations at later ages.

Scarlet Fever.—Though there were 74,824 cases, there were only 37 deaths; the case fatality of 0.05 per cent. was the lowest ever known.

Measles.—1948 was a year of high prevalence with nearly 400,000 cases; nevertheless there were only 327 deaths, and in this disease also the case fatality of 0.08 per cent. was by far the lowest ever recorded.

Whooping cough.—Resembled measles in being prevalent with 146,383 cases (the highest incidence since 1941) and in reaching the lowest case fatality recorded 0.51 per cent. Nevertheless it ranks high among the notifiable diseases as a cause of infant deaths, killing more than twice as many children as measles.

Cerebrospinal Fever.—Continued to decline. The 1,216 notifications were fewer than in any year since 1937 and the 300 deaths were fewer than in any year since the disease was made notifiable in 1912.

Acute Poliomyelitis and polioencephalitis. There were 1,848 corrected notifications, a higher incidence than any year except 1947; deaths numbered 241, more than any previous year except 1947 (707) and 1938 (256).

No fresh information has emerged about the usual vehicle or the usual portal of entry of infection or the exact method of spread. Carriers are probably numerous. It is generally agreed that most preventive measures are, with two excep-

* Report of the Ministry of Health for the year ended March 31st, 1949, including the Report of the Chief Medical Officer on the state of the Public Health for the year ended December 31st, 1948. Cmd. No. 7910, H.M. Stationery Office (price 7s. 6d. net, post free 7s. 11d.)

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