

APPENDIX C.

STATEMENT before the COMMITTEE by Dr. MacGREGOR.—4th May, 1883.

HON. W. MacGREGOR, M.D., C.M.G., Receiver-General and Chief Medical Officer of Fiji, questioned by the Committee: states that at the request of the Colonial Government of Fiji he held an inquiry a year ago into the condition of Polynesian immigrants in that colony. It had been reported that the mortality among Polynesians was greatest on the Rewa River, and he was accordingly sent to examine that district. Visited seven estates; found that there had been very great mortality among Polynesians, while there had been no extraordinary mortality among Fijians and coolies employed on the same estate. He dealt with a period of three or four months, extending from the beginning of the year to May, and calculated the statistics of mortality on the basis of what would be the mortality per 1,000 per annum, were the same rate maintained throughout the year. He found that the rate of deaths on one estate was as high as 750 per 1,000 per annum, on another 500, and on others from 200 to 300. The death rate of coolies on some estates was some 40 or 50 per 1,000, a rate only remarkable as contrasted with that of the Polynesians.

The immediate cause of mortality is dysentery, which appears sometimes in one district and sometimes in another, and is very contagious. Last year it was confined to the Rewa River; the year before it appeared on estates in the Windward Islands of the group. It is induced by exposure and bad diet.

There are many reasons why Polynesians are more affected by dysentery than are coolies. The Polynesian is constitutionally subject to the disease, while the coolie is not. The Polynesian is docile, and will uncomplainingly eat what is given him, half-ripe sweet potatoes or whatever it may be, and an employer may very easily give his labourer what is not fit for food and still keep just within the letter of the law; while the Indian buys his own food, cooks it himself, eats rice, flour cakes, chupatties, &c. The Polynesian has no idea of taking care of himself, while the Indian will do his best to make himself comfortable in his home, and will complain of leaks in the roof or of any discomfort. The Polynesian goes out to work in any weather, because he is engaged for a specified term of years. The Indian is paid by the day, and does not work if the weather is bad.

There are not many data to go upon as to the rate of mortality where no epidemic of dysentery takes place. There is occasionally heavy mortality on board the labour vessels, and immediately after landing. Special instance of this was the case of the "Dauntless" at the end of 1879. Dysentery appeared among the labourers, who were several days battered down in the hold during a gale, and the mortality after they had landed at Levuka was very great.

As already said, Polynesians are less able than others to resist the conditions to which labour are exposed. The mortality would thus in any case be great, but the high rate is in part due to preventable causes, such as spring from the inexperience and thoughtlessness of planters and overseers, who are generally ready to do what is suggested to them, but who never take the initiative in making their labour comfortable. Polynesians are only suited to such employment under very careful supervision.