

APPENDIX A.—ABORTION

On the subject of abortion a number of witnesses appeared before the Committee. The witnesses included medical practitioners, officers of the Police Department, and representatives of the churches, as well as several other institutions and numbers of private persons. The general tenor of the evidence was to emphasize the seriousness of the problem of induced abortion, but from the evidence submitted it would be difficult to assess the actual extent of this social evil. The police statistics showed that the number of prosecutions in any one year was relatively very small, and it would appear that there is an obvious reluctance on the part of juries to convict. There was a general agreement that, despite the fact that strenuous endeavours have been made to check this crime, it still continues to be a serious evil. For a time the Health Department made use of some very satisfactory propaganda showing the possible effects of criminal abortion, and we have no hesitation in recommending that the use of this type of propaganda should be continued. The cause of the evil is doubtless to be found in the moral outlook of the community.

After careful consideration, we have come to the conclusion that no facts in relation to the abortion evil have been revealed to us beyond those which were reported on by the Committee of Inquiry into the various aspects of the problem of abortion in New Zealand which was appointed by the Right Hon. P. Fraser, when Minister of Health, in 1937. We therefore feel that we can wholeheartedly endorse the conclusions of the Committee above referred to, and accordingly we reproduce the summary and conclusions of that Committee.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF REPORT OF COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM OF ABORTION IN NEW ZEALAND (McMILLAN REPORT).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I. The Committee is convinced that the induction of abortion is exceedingly common in New Zealand, and that it has definitely increased in recent years.

It has been estimated that at least one pregnancy in every five ends in abortion; in other words, that some 6,000 abortions occur in New Zealand every year.

Of these, it is believed that 4,000, at a conservative estimate, are criminally induced either through the agency of criminal abortionists or by self-induction, either of which is equally dangerous.

It is clear that death from septic abortion occurs almost entirely in such cases.

Such deaths have greatly increased in recent years, and now constitute one-quarter of the total maternal mortality; in some urban districts it amounts to nearly half of the total maternal mortality.

New Zealand has, according to comparative international statistics, one of the highest death-rates from abortion in the world.

II. The Committee, after taking evidence from witnesses representing all sections of the community, has formed the conclusion that the main causes for this resort to abortion are—(1) economic and domestic hardship; (2) changes in social and moral outlook; (3) pregnancy amongst the unmarried; and (4) in a small proportion of cases, fears of childbirth.

These matters are fully discussed.

III. Consideration has been given to the possible remedying of these causes:—

(a) In so far as economic hardship is the primary factor, certain recommendations have been made regarding financial, domestic, and obstetrical help by the State:

(b) To lessen any fear of childbirth where this exists, it has been recommended that the public should be informed that New Zealand now has a very low death-rate in actual childbirth and that relief of pain in labour is largely used. At the same time the Committee has advocated that further efforts in the direction of pain relief should be explored:

(c) For dealing with the problem of the unmarried mother, the Committee considers that the attack must be along the lines of more careful education of the young in matters of sex, prohibition of the advertisement and sale of contraceptives to the young, and a more tolerant attitude on the part of society towards these girls and their children:

(d) The Committee believes, however, that the most important cause of all is a change in the outlook of women which expresses itself in a demand of the right to limit—or avoid—the family, coupled with a widespread half-knowledge and use of birth-control methods—often ineffective. These failing, the temptation to abortion follows.