

HYGIENIC CONDITIONS.

Complaints of insufficient ventilation and other unsatisfactory hygienic conditions in some of our mines are occasionally received by the Mines Department, and, while it is conceded that the sanitary conditions in the mines of this Dominion are generally satisfactory, exceptions always prove the rule; and, in order to definitely ascertain the exact conditions prevailing, the Government has decided to appoint a Royal Commission to examine into and report on the hygienic sanitary conditions of all mines about which complaints have been made, with a view to all necessary precautions being taken and remedial measures provided where necessary to protect the health and lives of the men employed in the underground workings of our mines.

Parliament legislated last session to prevent the medical examination of men seeking employment in coal-mines. I intend to ask honourable members this session to legislate in a similar direction for men looking for employment in or about quartz-mines.

MINERS' RELIEF FUNDS.

The Coal-miners' Relief Fund, established many years ago, has been of very great assistance to coal-miners and their widows and orphans in cases of accident, or the accidental death of the breadwinner of the family, and the relief granted from this fund has invariably proved an inestimable boon. After the passing of the Workers' Compensation Act extraordinary legal technicalities or complications arose, which actually transferred the benefits of this Accident Relief Fund from the miners and their families to the accident insurance companies taking miners' risks; and where miners were insured by their employers against accident the amount they were entitled to under the Miners' Relief Fund was deducted from the amount they were entitled to under the Workers' Compensation Act, with the result that the insuring company derived the full benefit of the Miners' Relief Fund. Parliament last session legislated to prevent a continuance of this injustice; but I regret that the clause dealing with the matter was found to be inoperative. I propose to submit amending legislation on this point to honourable members this session.

The Coal-miners' Relief Fund was originally instituted by Parliament, and made a charge on the produce of the mine where the miner was employed, as an insurance fund against the dangerous nature of his employment: it is now somewhat of an anomaly that by subsequent legislation the miner and his family should be deprived of the relief which was formerly provided against the dangerous nature of his calling, to the benefit of an accident insurance company.

During the present session I propose to submit legislation to honourable members providing an Accident Relief Fund to miners working in our quartz-mines, and also on our mining-dredgers. The conditions of employment and liability to accident in our quartz-mines are at least as objectionable and dangerous as in coal-mines, and accidents on mining-dredgers are more numerous than in any other class of mining in this country. This fund will be maintained by a small charge on the bullion-production of the quartz-mines and dredgers operating in the Dominion.

KAURI-GUM.

The fluctuations in the production and value of kauri-gum are somewhat surprising. In reviewing this section of our mining industry in my last Statement I pointed out the extraordinary fall in production, which amounted to no less than £207,090 for the year ending on 31st December, 1908. It is now my agreeable duty to inform honourable members that the kauri-gum industry has made a phenomenal recovery during the year, with the result that the quantity exported increased from 5,530 tons in 1908 to 8,250 tons last year, and the value from £372,798 to £552,698 during the same period. It is difficult to account for the remarkable fluctuations in the exports of kauri-gum, but the most feasible explanation is exploitation of the market,