

PROTECTION OF INFANT LIFE AND THE SUPERVISION OF ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN.

Some months ago I prepared a return showing that the mortality among infants and children under the age of five years amounted to 21,000 when taken over a period of ten years. The number of children under fifteen years of age who died during the period of the war amounted to over 15,000. An examination of the vital statistics shows that the greater proportion of these deaths occurred before the children attained the age of twelve months, and were due mainly to preventable causes, such as lack of proper feeding. In referring to illegitimate children, it is a notorious fact that the death-rate is more than 100 per cent. higher than the death-rate among normal children. The teaching of mother-craft and the supervision of the feeding of infants born in wedlock and brought up under normal conditions may well be left to the Plunket Society, which is carrying out a work of national importance, but in dealing with the illegitimate child and the infant whose parents are unfit to look after him it is better that experienced State officials should act.

I feel that the State should take a hand, in the centres of population, at any rate, in ensuring that every infant who is artificially fed is provided with pure milk modified according to its need. Probably valuable assistance in this connection could be given by the Plunket Society.

ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN.

At the present time no system of supervision exists for the illegitimate child unless he happens to be placed for payment in a foster-home apart from his mother. Even then the supervision ceases when he attains the age of six years. The need for assisting mothers of illegitimate children is also a most pressing one. Not only should the State ensure that an illegitimate child is properly provided for, but it should also assist the mothers in regaining their social status, if possible, and in obtaining assistance from the men responsible for their condition.

SUPERVISION OF DEPENDENT CHILDREN.

At the present time there is no supervision whatever of children who may be handed over by their parents to persons who may be entirely unfitted to care for children. With my experience in connection with the industrial school system I have been impressed with the need for the prevention of the trafficking in children, especially illegitimate children. Numerous cases have come under the notice of the Department where children have been handed over by parents to persons who have overworked, ill-treated, and half starved them without running any risk of being interfered with by any State authority.

GUARDIANSHIP OF ORPHAN CHILDREN.

Provision has been made in the draft legislation for the State to take over the guardianship of all children who have lost both parents, unless, of course, guardians have already been appointed during the lifetime of one or other of the parents. The need for such legislation has been acutely felt by the Department in dealing with the children who lost both parents during the late influenza epidemic. As a matter of urgent necessity these children have had to be dealt with under the provisions of the Industrial Schools Act, but provision is made in the proposed legislation for the elimination of all the Court records in these cases.

ASSISTANCE TO DESERTED MOTHERS AND WIDOWS.

At the present time the lot of a deserted wife with children is a particularly hard one. It is true that she can always apply to the local Hospital and Charitable Aid Board for relief, but to this procedure there are objections: it does not provide, for instance, for the proper care and training of children. The present method of dealing with such children is by committal to industrial schools as destitute. They are taken away from their mothers (who may be thoroughly respectable persons) and placed in foster-homes. At present the Department has no authority to make payments to mothers in such cases. From the taxpayer's point of view the anomaly is a serious one, for while it costs at least £1 2s. a week for the first twelve months for each child so placed in a foster-home, it is probable that the child could be kept in his own home for perhaps a little more than half this sum.

ESTABLISHMENT OF CONVALESCENT HOMES FOR CHILDREN.

In the congested poorer areas of our large cities there are many children who would receive immense benefit if they could be taken into a convalescent home or cottage for a month or two when they are run down in health, or when recovering from the many illnesses and diseases that childhood is heir to, or for a period subsequent to operations, &c. The Government provides an expensive system of primary education, but it is not good business for the State if the children are not physically fit to take full advantage of the education offering.

There is also very great need for providing for the temporary accommodation of children whose parent, either through illness or childbirth, is unable for the time being to look after her children. The expectant mother who already has a family of young children has little or no means at present of obtaining relief from family troubles. Generally she works on until the very last day before confinement, and at the earliest possible moment afterwards has to resume her home duties. Many mothers break down under the strain, and naturally the child who is just born also suffers. During the last two years I have had to deal with many pitiful cases of this kind, and, although we have no legal authority to do so, yet in many instances relief has been afforded by the Department in placing the children for a few weeks in temporary foster-homes.

CHILD-LABOUR.

For years past nearly every organization dealing with children—Truant Officers, school-teachers, Medical Inspectors of Schools, and others—have brought under notice the great need for regulating the employment of children in street trading, selling sweets, &c., in picture-theatres, &c., in delivering milk and newspapers, &c. Up to the present no attempt has been made to cope with this serious question, although the need has been so evident for years past. Fully 85 per cent. of the delinquent