

SUPERVISION OF INFANT LIFE.

[Extract from the Official Year-book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1910.]

It has been frequently stated in recent years that, when the social, climatic, and industrial conditions are taken into consideration the infantile mortality of Australia, particularly in the large towns, is much higher than it should be. It is now generally recognized, however, that infant mortality is largely attributable to parental ignorance and neglect, and that, in particular, improper feeding is accountable for perhaps the majority of infant-deaths. In all the States of the Commonwealth Acts have been passed with the object of generally supervising the conditions of infant life and of reducing the rate of infantile mortality, and in many of the large towns measures have been adopted by private individuals to spread among the mothers a knowledge of the best methods of feeding and caring for their infants. Milk Institutes have also been established after the manner of the *Gouttes de Lait** in Europe, with the object of reducing the number of deaths of infants from milk poisoning in the summer months. Reference has been made in a previous part of this book to the number of infantile deaths and the rates of infantile mortality in each State, and it will be convenient to here show corresponding particulars for the year 1909, classified according to metropolitan and other districts in each State:—

INFANTILE DEATHS AND RATES OF INFANTILE MORTALITY FOR METROPOLITAN AND OTHER DISTRICTS, 1909.

Districts.	N.S.W.	Victoria.	Queensland.	S.A.	W.A.	Tasmania.	C'wealth.
NUMBER OF INFANTILE DEATHS.							
Metropolitan ..	1,297	1,129	328	320	244	85	3,403
Other ..	1,937	1,122	781	293	349	272	4,754
RATES OF INFANTILE MORTALITY.— <i>I.e.</i> , the number of deaths of infants under one year of age per thousand births.							
Metropolitan ..	82.07	84.47	90.23	69.50	81.44	74.76	81.92
Other ..	69.23	61.72	65.54	53.40	75.78	62.34	65.55

It may be seen that in each State the rates of mortality are higher in the metropolitan than in other districts. The causes of "preventable" deaths may generally be attributed to milk poisoning, want of knowledge on the part of mothers, inability to nurse, and lack of the necessary medical facilities.

The figures in the above table do not, however, completely represent the hygienic aspect of the question. For every infant death recorded there are probably three or four survivors who have sustained more or less serious permanent physical damage, quite apart from injuries at birth or congenital causes. It is stated that the far-reaching influence of the first year or two of life upon the whole subsequent physical welfare of the individual cannot be recognized too clearly, and it has been alleged that many serious defects and diseases occurring in later life may be credited to results ensuing from infantile disease. This is particularly the case in respect of digestive diseases.†

It will be convenient to refer briefly to the principal Acts which have been passed in each State dealing with the subject of child-life, and to the principal functions of the States' Children's Departments.

2. NEW SOUTH WALES.—In this State there is a State Children's Relief Board under the direct control of an Honorary Board of nine members and under the administration of the Minister of Public Instruction.

(i.) *Scope of Operations.*—The scope of the Department's operations comprises matters under the following Acts:—

- (a.) *The Infants' Protection Act, 1904.*—This Act deals with the control of children up to the age of seven years in licensed homes, and with the supervision of such homes. These latter fall into two classes—(1) The private homes of individual women householders, licensed for two or three children, and (2) institutions maintained by public subscription, licensed for any number of children up to 100. The Act also deals with paternity proceedings in connection with the enforcement of maintenance for illegitimate children.
- (b.) *The State Children's Relief Act, 1901.*—This Act deals with the boarding-out of destitute children, and includes the extension of monetary aid for children under twelve years of age who are allowed to remain with their own mothers when the latter are widows or deserted wives in destitute circumstances.
- (c.) *The Children's Protection Act, 1902,* deals with the supervision of lying-in homes, in so far as the children born therein are concerned. It also provides for the registration of children up to three years old boarded out privately apart from their mothers.

* Organized action in this direction commenced in 1894 in Belgium. The original Belgian society is known as the "*Société des Gouttes de Lait.*" The movement has become an international one, and branches of the society have been founded all over Europe. Similar philanthropic work was commenced in the United States of America before 1894.

† See Report of Department of Public Health of Tasmania for 1906-7, by J. S. C. Elkington, Esq., M.D., D.P.H., Chief Health Officer.