

A MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH FOR IRELAND.

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One of the greatest of English Statesmen, Lord Beaconsfield, paraphrasing the famous Scriptural utterance—"Vanitas vanitatum et omnia est vanitas," declared "Sanitas sanitatum et omnia est Sanitas": thus realising fully the truth of the declaration—"Salus populi suprema lex." We are all ready and willing to assent to these propositions, more especially now - a - days. Of a truth, the highest and first duty of a State is the health of the people; and all else were vanity which did not take cognizance, and make provision for, the health of the people. Never, perhaps, so much as now has it been fully realised that the most important and most enduring wealth of a State depends upon the health and strength, the strong arms and trained brains of a people. Men of the highest grade of health—of grade "A"—are to be specially sought for, to guard the well-being and the safety of their country. This is recognised by all, from the Prime Minister downwards. Recognising the importance of the preservation of the health and strength of the people, a Ministry of Health is about to be provided for England, and no doubt for Wales and Scotland, whilst Ireland is excluded from the benefits to be conferred on the sister countries.

The fact that the public health of Ireland has been hitherto largely neglected by the Legislature, as compared with the other portions of the United Kingdom, is surely not an argument in favour of further neglect, but rather an additional reason for extending to Ireland the benefits expected to accrue from the appointment of a Minister of Health; and assuredly the need for closer attention to the public health is far more urgent in Ireland than in the adjoining countries. Hitherto several Acts have been passed for England which have not been extended to Ireland. In fact, no Public Health Act has been passed for Ireland since 1878, while several Acts have been passed for England, Wales and Scotland.

Foremost let me say that—

- (1) The Midwives Act was passed for England in 1902, whilst it was only last year that a similar Act has been passed for Ireland;

- (2) The inspection of school children, a most urgently necessary provision, passed for the sister countries, has been hitherto denied to Ireland;
- (3) Again, the Act enabling County Councils and large Urban areas to appoint Medical Officers of Health has been denied to Ireland;
- (4) The Act of 1878, passed for Ireland, was made voluntary, not compulsory, and thereby was rendered largely nugatory and inoperative. The result of the progressive Public Health Legislation carried for England, Wales and Scotland has been fraught with much benefit.

This is shown, above all things, by the difference in the death rates of the three countries within the last fifty years. Thus the death rate for 1866-70 in England and Wales was 2,250 per 100,000 of the population; in Scotland it was 2,190, and in Ireland 1,640; whereas in the period 1911-15 the death rate for England and Wales had fallen to 1,425 per 100,000 of the population, being a decrease of 36 per cent., whilst in Scotland it had fallen to 1,560 per 100,000, a decrease of 29 per cent.; and in Ireland, on the other hand, the death rate had risen higher than it had been in the first period mentioned—namely, to 1,675, as compared with 1,640—representing an increase of 2 per cent. Surely this wrong should not be allowed to last! The health and lives of our people are very precious to us, and we demand that they should receive equal justice and attention. Of old, the demand was constantly made by the people of Ireland for the extension and application of equal and just laws to them, and even on a memorable occasion large sums of money were voted to the Crown, as in the reign of Charles I., for equal and indifferent justice.

The public health of a country, it is scarcely necessary to say, includes everything in the life of a people from the cradle to the grave. Unfortunately the death rate of children in Ireland is disproportionately far too high, and calls for administrative help and supervision. Happily, much has been done of late by the various Baby Clubs, which were set on foot by the kindly heart and active brain of the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Tara.

As already pointed out, the absence hitherto of a proper Midwives Act was largely to blame for excessive mortality amongst mothers and infants at child-birth.

The Medical Inspection of school children is urgently needed to save the children from constitutional and in-

fective diseases, such as Tuberculosis, Scarletina, Measles, Whooping Cough, etc.

Then it is well within the knowledge of all that the housing accommodation of our people is shamefully bad, especially in Dublin, and other large cities, towns and villages in the rural parts of Ireland. A vast number of diseases, especially of a Tubercular character, is to be ascribed to the defective and insanitary habitations in which our people are compelled to live. It is to be hoped that before long an example will be afforded in Dublin by an attempt being successfully made to cleanse the Augean stable, which is a disgrace to our city and a danger to our people.

I venture to say that the Hospitals which have been provided in Dublin by the benevolence and bounty of private individuals compare favourably with those in any other city, as to the care and treatment of the inmates. If one realises all that has been done, and speculates on what the condition of the people would be without these Institutions, for which the State had in most cases done nothing, one would be struck with pity and horror at the lot of the people thus left unprovided for. A similar remark might be made with regard to the Orphanages which have been founded mostly by Religious Bodies throughout Ireland. If these did not exist, a condition might be met with such as the biting indignation, the "Sæva indignatio" of Swift, depicted, and lashed with scorn, in the eighteenth century.

With regard to the Medical provisions afforded by the Poor Law, whilst most people recognise and readily admit the splendid services rendered to the poor by the Poor Law Medical Officers, we must in justice also admit that the medical service is wretchedly underpaid at all times, and more especially at the present time, where other services go up by leaps and bounds, far beyond the most sanguine expectations hitherto entertained by the proletariat.

Let us hope that the threat of the formation of Medical Trades Unions, and even of a strike, may be rendered unnecessary by a more adequate requital of the services rendered by the Dispensary Medical Officers of Ireland.

In this connection I would point out that many of the Dispensaries in the country parts of Ireland are utterly and disgracefully unsuitable for the ministrations to the wants of the sick poor. The space afforded is quite inadequate, and provision for privacy and for the proper examination of cases is entirely wanting.

With regard to County Infirmaries, it has always seemed to me that it would be very desirable that all the medical men of the large towns, where the County Infirmaries are established, should be connected with each Infirmary as members of the Staff. Thus a generous rivalry would be created and mutual benefits would be conferred on the medical men, whilst the patients and the public would in every way benefit largely.

I do not care to enter into the many other medical questions involved under the heading, "Public Health." All alike would be benefited by the co-ordination and subordination which should be provided by the establishment of a Ministry of Health for Ireland, with a Minister responsible to the Crown or to Parliament.

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