

THE LICENSED FOSTER-MOTHERS.

That all persons who receive infants from their parents to nurse should be subject to control, and that it should be the duty of the State to see that the infants are properly cared for, is generally admitted. The law requiring all persons acting as nurses to infants to be licensed was passed in this colony in 1881, and similar enactments have been passed in other colonies and in Canada. When the provisions respecting the control of foster-mothers were transferred from the Act of 1881 to the Act of 1895 Parliament made a very important alteration. In the original statute every person taking a child "with or without fee or reward" required to be licensed. In the law of 1895 the words in italics were struck out, and "for gain or reward" inserted. The consequence is that while all respectable careful women who do not fear inspection apply for licenses, those over whom supervision is most necessary evade the law and escape punishment by asserting that they receive no fee or reward for keeping the child. Recently the department, being dissatisfied with the character of a licensed foster-mother, cancelled her license and gave her notice to return the infant in her care to its mother. She gave up the license, but kept the child, she having agreed, so she stated, to adopt it without any payment in future. This woman, therefore, who is regarded as unfit to be entrusted with the care of children, continues to keep a child, and because she conspires with the child's mother to assert that she receives no payment the department cannot take any action, even to see that the child the law allows her to keep is properly cared for. The Council has urged that the words "for gain or reward" should be repealed, as while the law stands in its present form it is practically valueless as a means of preventing baby-farming.

The number of applications for licenses received was 124, comprising 69 for new licenses and 55 for renewal of old licenses. Licenses were granted to 115 applicants, refused to 6, and 3 applications were withdrawn. Three licenses were cancelled during currency. The number of licenses in force on the 30th June was 94.

The foster-mothers had in their charge during the year 148 infants, of which number 28 died. The mortality appears high, and it is due largely to the fact that numbers of the children are never nursed by their mothers, but are placed in the care of foster-mothers sometimes from birth. The frequent removals by their mothers of infants from one foster-mother to another, and the consequent changes in diet and methods of feeding bring on marasmus, diarrhoea, and consumption of the bowels, which ailments are the causes of death in the majority of instances.

All the licensed foster-mothers appear to take great care of the infants in their charge, and on the whole their homes are clean and well kept.

LICENSED LYING-IN HOMES.

The law requiring all private lying-in homes to be licensed is, like that regarding foster-mothers, rendered more or less ineffectual by the words for "gain or reward" being included. If these words are repealed, as recommended by the Council, the department will then be better able than now to require all lying-in homes to take out licenses and to keep the records of the birth and disposal of infants required by the Act.

There were twenty-two licensed lying-in homes on the 30th June, 1897, and during the year there were sixty confinements in these homes.

THE REVENUE.

The total revenue for the year is £1,388 14s. 4d., an increase of £248 17s. 10d. over the revenue for 1895-96. This sum is made up of £1,219 11s. 10d., maintenance fees; £142 7s. 4d., proceeds of sales of produce and stock from the Boys' Reformatory; £11 13s., license fees; £3 18s. 6d., amount paid by guardians for deficiencies in outfits of children returned; and £11 3s. 8d., sundries.

THE COLLECTION OF MAINTENANCE FEES.

During the year 1895-96 the sum of £994 2s. 4d. was collected from parents and relatives towards the maintenance of children in the care of the Council, and during the year under review the amount so obtained was £1,219 11s. 10d., or an increase of £225 9s. 6d.

In addition to this amount the department also collected on account of mothers of children not under the charge of the State, the sum of £1,145 0s. 2d., making a total of £2,393 1s. 6d. (including £28 9s. 6d. costs) obtained from relatives for maintenance fees.

Legal proceedings were taken in 188 cases for desertion, non-compliance with maintenance orders, and for maintenance of illegitimate children. Of these 188 informations, 88 were withdrawn on the defendant making satisfactory arrangements with the department, 6 were dismissed by the Court, and in 94 cases the Court ordered the persons summoned to contribute maintenance fees or punished them.

THE EXPENDITURE.

The total expenditure for the year was £14,831 19s. 8d., or £800 11s. 8d. more than for the preceding twelve months. The principal increases are in the Boys' Reformatory, £457 8s. 8d., due entirely to the large increase in the number of inmates, and "Placing out, &c.—Children placed out," £363 0s. 4d., caused mainly by the expenditure necessary to supply overcoats to all boys placed out, and additional expense of placing out a larger number of children. Increases are also present in the expenditure under "Central administration," £67 14s. 11d.; Girls' Reformatory, £42 6s. 9d.; and licensed foster-mothers and lying-in homes, £69 18s. 5d. (the expenditure shown in last report was for six months only). There is a decrease of £4 7s. 8d. under "Industrial School," and £195 9s. 9d. under "Maintenance of children placed out," due to reduction in rate of subsidy.

Compared with last year the *per capita* cost per week is lower in the Industrial School, 8s. and 6s. 9½d.; in the Boys' Reformatory, 8s. 7½d. and 7s. 9½d., respectively; and higher in the girls' reformatory, 14s. 8½d. and 16s. 3½d., and "Supervision, &c., of children placed out," 1s. 2½d. and 1s. 4½d. respectively.