

INFANT LIFE PROTECTION.

Education Department, Wellington, 31st May, 1909.

The Hon. the Minister of Education.

I SUBMIT the following memorandum on the work of the Department in respect of infant life protection during the year 1908.

In 1880 the administration of the industrial schools was given to the Education Department, which early adopted the boarding-out system. During the past quarter of a century, therefore, it has not only acquired and formulated an extensive theoretical knowledge of the best methods of dealing with young dependent children, but has also secured a staff of experienced women—foster-parents, Local Visitors, lady Managers, and inspecting officers—in whose hands the immediate care of the children is placed. Consequently, when, in 1907, it was decided to remove from the control of the Police Department the administration of the law relating to infant-life protection, the Education Department was naturally selected to carry on the work.

In connection with industrial schools the boarding-out system has, in New Zealand, had an adequate and a very satisfactory trial. The following is an extract from the Education Report for the year 1906 :—

“As time goes on it becomes more evident that the system of boarding out children in foster-homes is the most beneficent method of providing for them. Boarding-out was inaugurated in New Zealand in 1883, and the many hundreds of cases where the success of the system has been quite beyond question provide an ample answer to those who, through want of full acquaintance with the effects of it, are prone to condemn it when one of its failures occurs. During these twenty-four years the average number of children boarded out has been 454, the numbers rising from 209 in 1883 to 690 in 1906. In that time the number of deaths has been 51, of whom 32 were under four years of age, the average annual death-rate being 0.46 per cent. Such a result is very satisfactory, especially when the circumstances of the bulk of industrial-school children prior to their admission, and the fact that many of them are exceedingly delicate infants, are taken into consideration.”

The leading provisions of the Infant Life Protection Act are as follows: Unless licensed to act as a foster-parent, no person, in consideration of any payment or reward, may receive or take charge of an infant for the purpose of nursing or maintaining it apart from its parents or guardians for a longer period than seven consecutive days. “Infant” means a child under the age of six years. In certain cases the Minister may grant exemption. Officers appointed under the Act may enter foster-homes at any time, or any premises in which they have reason to believe that infants are being maintained contrary to the Act; they may be accompanied by a medical practitioner, and in cases of emergency may remove any infant from any foster-home or other premises as aforesaid. No other person may remove a child from a foster-home without the consent of an official appointed under the Act. Within twenty-four hours of the death of an infant the foster-parent is to give notice to the constable in charge of the nearest police-station, who is forthwith to report to the Coroner. If the Coroner deems an inquest necessary, he may inquire not only into the immediate cause of death, but also into all the circumstances relating to the treatment and condition of the infant during life which in his opinion should be inquired into in the public interest. No payment is to be made to or received by a foster-parent in respect of any infant except in pursuance of an agreement approved by an official under the Act. If the payment is in the nature of a premium, the whole sum is to be deposited with an authorised official to be paid to the foster-parent by way of weekly payments. This provision applies to premiums paid on the adoption of children. If default is made in payment of any sum payable under an agreement as aforesaid, the amount or part of it may be paid out of moneys appropriated for the purposes of the Act, and in such case is recoverable from the near relatives of the infant.

Under the consolidation of the law which took place last year a number of enactments dealing with infants in the purely legal acceptance of the term were brought together, rather unfortunately it would seem, with those in which the word is used simply in the popular sense, so that with the new title of “The Infants Act, 1908,” the significant phrase “infant life protection” has disappeared. It has, however, been considered advisable to retain this expression for the special work which brings the Education Department into relation with the Act. The Industrial Schools Act has not been taken into The Infants Act, although it, of course, deals with legal infants too.

The Infant Life Protection Act was passed on the 20th November, 1907, and came into operation on the 1st January, 1908, by which date the Department's arrangements for its administration were complete. The lady managers of the industrial schools at Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin were appointed District Agents, and to each of them was assigned, as assistant and visiting nurse, a lady experienced in the care of young children. Sub-agents were also appointed in the more important of the smaller centres. All the homes were in due course visited by these ladies, and the provisions of the Act explained to the foster-parents. During the year a great deal of difficult and trying work has been very successfully carried out by the District Agents and their assistants, and the Department gratefully acknowledges their services.