

## THE FLYING START

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. MURIEL BELL, Nutritionist to the Department of Health)

AT several recent conferences, for example of the Nutrition Society and of the Royal Society of Medicine, the unanimous opinion has been expressed that breast feeding of infants is superior to artificial feeding, provided, of course, that the mother's milk supply is a good one. Here are some quotations from a book by a medical author with a wide experience in Poplar and Woolwich districts in London, in a chapter entitled "The Importance of Breast Feeding to the Newborn":

"If I ask our medical or nursing visitors whether they attach much importance to human milk, they one and all extol its properties. 'Nothing to touch it,' they exclaim. 'Breast milk every time. But, you know what it is, so many women don't seem able to nurse their babies nowadays, or they won't.'" "In this neighbourhood" (says the writer) "the number who 'won't' feed their babies is negligible. The number who try but fail is very large."

He then goes on to state that the death-rate among infants in the early weeks of life is still high. "It is in these weeks that any nutritional failure opens the door to infections that are so dangerous, so easily fatal. In each and every baby it is the flying start that matters." He then gives typical instances of babies who, through failure of the mother's milk in the first few weeks, developed a cold which finally led to a fatal result. "Nothing is more striking than the high resistance to catarrhal infections of the successfully breast-fed."

### Why the Superiority?

To look into the question of the composition of humanised cow's milk compared with human milk does not enlighten us very much as to why there is this superiority of the latter. We must remember, however, that we are still only beginning to know something about all the necessary factors for nutrition—and our dissection of foods into their important constituents is as yet only imperfect. We generally ascribe the benefits derived from human milk to the fact that it contains chemical substances that we call "immune bodies"—i.e., it transfers from the mother the power to resist diseases that afflict human beings.

Turning to the conditions in our own country, the report of the Medical Adviser to the Plunket Society for 1939-40 analyses the statistics for infantile mortality in New Zealand. The decline in the infantile death rate during this century is due to the reduction in the death rate after the first month of life; prior to that period, there has been very little improvement, and the report states that "it is improbable that a marked reduction in the total infantile mortality rate will take place until a further reduction is effected in the death rate of infants under one month. Oslo, with a neo-natal rate of 12.3 in 1933, offers a challenge which New Zealand, with a rate of 21.8 cannot afford to ignore."



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