INFANT LIFE PROTECTION.

By A. WELLESLEY HARRIS, M.D.

(FELLOW.)

ALL persons interested in public health matters have suddenly bestirred themselves into considering the best means of lessening infantile mortality, and of remedying the conditions which for so long have been neglected.

The wastage of infant life is enormous, and although we all agree that deaths of infants under 1 year must exist in a large proportion, we know, as sanitarians, that a considerable percentage of these deaths are due to preventable diseases, and every step is being taken by public health authorities to improve the environment of infants, to educate the parents in the feeding and management of their young, and even to provide specially prepared food to those who are either unable to nurse their children or to provide them with satisfactory substitutes for breast milk.

In the crusade against infantile mortality, no action has been taken, so far as I am aware, to improve the condition of a large number of children who are for special reasons entrusted to the care of absolute strangers. I refer to children put out to nurse.

As you are aware, certain protection is afforded by the Infant Life Protection Act, an Act which requires the registration of all persons receiving for hire or reward for a period of more than 48 hours, two or more children under the age of five. Beyond this registration, there is a certain amount of salutary control over the persons referred to. Unfortunately, however, there are a very large number of nurse children who are not in registered homes, the receivers of the children contracting out of the Act by not receiving more than one child at a time.

The controlling authority under the Act is the London County Council in London, and outside the Metropolitan area the Boards of Guardians.

In regard to the administration in London, I think there can be no doubt that the powers should be transferred to the Metropolitan Borough Councils, who now receive a return of all births in the district, and are likely to receive other information which the London County Council

could not obtain. Further, the Borough Councils are provided with the staff necessary for efficient administration. At present, in London, the Act has not even the advantage of being administered by the Public Health Department of the London County Council, but is governed by the Public Control Department, and on examining the last report one finds matter relating to this very important subject sandwiched in between reports in regard to the Explosives Act, glanders and rabies, the importation of dogs, and swine fever.

In areas outside London the powers should be transferred from the Boards of Guardians to the local sanitary authorities.

From your experience as medical officers of provincial towns, I am sure you will agree that such an alteration is desirable.

I have pleasure in moving the following resolution:—

RESOLUTION.

That, in the opinion of this Conference, an amendment of the law relating to the protection of infant life is required, in order that any person receiving for hire or reward for a period of more than 48 hours *one* or more children under the age of five, should be controlled by the Act; that the administration of the Act should be transferred from the Boards of Guardians to the Local Sanitary Authorities, and in London, from the London County Council to the Borough Councils.

DR. H. SCURFIELD (Sheffield) seconded the resolution proposed by Dr. Harris. He thought it was most necessary that the protection of the Act should be extended to all farmed-out children.

DR. H. M. RICHARDS (Croydon) supported the resolution, and instanced a case which had come under his personal notice within the last week or so. An illegitimate child was being well cared for at a registered house. The inspectress had reason to suspect that the death of the infant would be not unwelcome, and this suspicion was strengthened on her ascertaining that the mother proposed to remove the infant to a home where only one child was taken, and where there would therefore not be any supervision. He deprecated the transfer of the powers to smaller local authorities, but considered that the inspection should be done by the county council and not by the guardians.

DR. E. DAVIES (London) supported the proposal that the reception of single infants should be registered, because the opportunities of concealment of improper treatment were not halved but doubled in the case of single infants.

DR. MARTIN (Gloucester C.C.) strongly supported the resolution on the evidence given at the National Conference on Infantile Mortality, where it was

stated by those who had considerable experience of the working of the existing Act that women would reduce the number of children they formerly took, so as to escape supervision under the Act. It was essential that these cases should be brought under efficient inspection.

MR. HARDING ROBERTS (Holywell) was of opinion that the question should not be passed without due consideration on the part of such an important gathering. The object of the Infant Life Protection Act was to prevent baby-farming, and that object could be attained if the Act were rigidly enforced. There was a large number of cases where it would be an extreme hardship if each single child had to be registered, and he disagreed with the first part of the resolution. He also disagreed with the second part: the transferring out of the Act from the boards of guardians to any other authority. He contended that boards of guardians had the requisite efficient machinery for working the Act, and that it was not desirable to transfer it to any other authority, who would either have to create new machinery or be ineffective.

DR. HOWARD JONES (Newport) said the remarks of Mr. Harding Roberts called for serious comment. If any infants did require protection, they were those born out of wedlock. It was the speaker's practice to tabulate the deaths among illegitimate children separately from legitimate children. Last year, at Newport, the death-rate among illegitimate children was 366 per 1,000 births, compared with 121 per 1,000 among other infants. This pointed to the necessity for supervision over the houses receiving such children.

DR. FRANCIS FREMANTLE (Hertfordshire) said if any change took place, it should be to the authority that carried out the Midwives Act. The work of supervision of midwives and the work of infant protection largely coincided.

DR. KAYE (West Riding C.C.) proposed the following amendment:—

That the county councils and county boroughs outside London be the administrators of the Act.

DR. HANDFORD (Nottingham C.C.) seconded the amendment, and pointed out that the omission of the word "local" made no difference. The county councils were not sanitary authorities except for special purposes; and the resolution, if passed, would in country districts leave the administration in the same hands as before, since in many instances the boards of guardians and the rural district councils consisted of the same persons. When the administration of the Midwives Act had been delegated to the district councils, the results had not been so good as was expected, and infant life protection was a very similar matter.

DR. EUSTACE HILL (Durham C.C.) did not think representatives at this Conference outside London could vote on the second part of the resolution without

knowing the reason why the administration of the Act should be transferred from the London County Council to the London Borough Councils. The reason for the change had not been touched upon by the mover of the resolution.

DR. WILLOUGHBY (Eastbourne) said that no reason had been given for the transference of the powers from guardians to county councils, and until it had been shown that the guardians neglected their duties in this respect, why should the transfer take place? The guardians had the machinery and the county councils often had not. If the powers were to be transferred, it should be to sanitary authorities rather than to county councils, who often had no medical officers.

ALDERMAN HENRY DUNN (W. Riding C.C.) drew attention to the fact that while the baby farmer desired to preserve the children for gain, the woman who took single infants (to prevent inspection) might desire to destroy them. It was absolutely necessary that single infants put out to nurse should have the same supervision and oversight as may be provided for two or more infants.

RESOLUTION.

The following was finally carried:—*

That, in the opinion of this Conference, an amendment of the law relating to the protection of infant life is required, in order that any person receiving for hire or reward for a period of more than 48 hours *one* or more children under the age of five, should be controlled by the Act: and that the county councils and county boroughs outside London be the administrators of the Act.

* Resolutions passed are referred to the Council, and their decision is given on page 606, No. 10.