Thoughts

ON THE

EMPLOYMENT OF PREGNANT WOMEN IN MUNITION FACTORIES.¹

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THE factory from which the following report was compiled is built on the site of a farm in flat, open and well-drained fields; there is an abundance of fresh air and sunshine. All the buildings are very well ventilated with cross and end-to-end through draughts, and the sanitary and bath accommodation is in excess of the Home Office requirements. The factory is particularly well managed; the canteen is good; the factory clothes are most suitable and made so as entirely to cover all the worker's private clothes.

The factory is situated a mile from the station and tram terminus, and all workers have of necessity to walk this mile as there is no other way of reaching their work. The exercise is most salutary for them, and it is surprising to see the difference in their general appearance noticeable after about six weeks' work with us.

A covered way is provided alongside the roadway for protection in rough weather, and this pathway has been well rolled so that it is always firm and dry.

Our workers are of the usual city type—undersized, badly developed, with very bad teeth and often anæmic. About 50 per cent. are married, and often these have their household duties to attend to after they get home at night. In spite of these drawbacks, after about six weeks' work, and hard work too, if they have the grit to stick it, they become more robust, less anæmic and much more healthy-looking in every way. I consider that this improvement is due to healthy exercise, well disciplined work, the good and abundant food supplied in the canteen at moderate price, and above all to the abundance of fresh air which they are obliged to get when working in this factory. The fresh air and hard work make them hungry, and getting good money they can well afford to obtain sufficient food. During their meal hour they have amusement, some days they dance and on others concerts are arranged. All workers are medically examined before being engaged, and if found suitable but with bad teeth these are extracted by the factory dentist before work is actually started.

During the nine months, June 1st, 1917, to Feb. 28th, 1918, I have kept records with a view to finding out the effect of the work on any woman who may become pregnant. Of the total number of women workers engaged in that period (1197) 575 were married and 622 single. The married women have been brought into the labour market for various reasons. Munitions factories have given them their opportunity, and factory managers have no alternative but to engage them.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM.

The question is one which may be looked at from two standpoints: (a) under the enforced conditions due to the war; (b) post-war conditions.

As regards (a), seeing that it is essential for a certain percentage of married women to take up some form of work outside the home, it is equally essential for their medical welfare to be carefully studied, with a view to bringing about a set of conditions which will make it possible for them to carry on their work to the satisfaction of their employers, and without fear of injury to themselves or the future race. In so doing it should be possible to find by experience whether similar conditions could be applied in post-war days if the necessity for married women to work then should still exist.

In a factory such as ours the work is mostly arduous and heavy, but the factory management have had all operations classified into heavy, medium, and light operation, and they are also willing, if they have the vacancies, to put workers who are not fit for the heavier operation into the less arduous classes, so that I have been enabled in many cases

(by this coöperation on the part of the factory management) to transfer pregnant workers from the heavy work to the lighter operation and so gather materials for this report.

The nature of the work also necessitates extreme cleanliness, and in this factory such cleanliness is enforced with the utmost rigour.

The question then arises in a factory of this kind, where so many married women are employed, whether when they may become pregnant it is better to dismiss them at once or to keep them at work until within a few weeks of their confinement. Up to the present I have not taken on new workers if they are pregnant, as I do not consider that they would become proficient before they had to leave, and this would be hardly fair to the factory.

THE QUESTION OF EFFICIENCY.

We will first study the question solely from the factory's point of view—"efficiency." The authorities of the factory might put forward the arguments—

(a) That the women were no longer capable of heavy work.
(b) That not being in good state of health their time-keeping and work record would be bad.

(c) That miscarriages might occur, which would disorganise the work at the time, and which also might lead to compensation claims.

(d) That in the event of there not being any suitable light work at which to employ them the women would not be worth their pay.

A natural prejudice would also be felt against seeing women about in such a condition, but this hardly amounts to a reason, and in a factory where about 90 per cent. of the workers are women should not even be a prejudice.

The answers to these arguments are:—

(a) The women need not be capable of very heavy work, as in most factories there are many lighter duties to which pregnant women could be put, and in which no strain is put upon the abdominal muscles, while they do not in fact necessitate as much energy as is required in household duties.

(b) The fear that the woman's time and work records would be bad at such times is one that in some cases, of course, may be justified, but if the upset is such as really to incapacitate her and to cause her to neglect her work, then there is nothing to compel her to stay if she wishes to leave, and nothing to prevent the factory dismissing her if really a negligent worker. On the other hand, some women feel better when in such a condition, and in all cases their health must be the better for regular and sufficient exercise, good food, and healthy occupation for their minds and bodies.

The time when the pregnancy is most likely to upset the health is during the first four months, when the condition cannot be diagnosed unless the worker comes to the factory doctor complaining of symptoms pointing to such a condition, and this she is not likely to do if she fears dismissal, so that bad time-keeping and slack work due to such causes cannot be eliminated, even in factories where dismissal is the rule.

A woman who is anxious to retain her work will do her best to attend regularly and to give as much satisfaction as possible in all her duties, and the mere fact that she is regular in her habits will probably keep her in better health, and so increase her capacity for work.

(c) Miscarriages are very unlikely to occur if the woman is encouraged to make her condition known to the factory doctor at as early date as possible, with a view to being transferred to, or retained in, work suitable to her condition, and if she is not in fear of dismissal she will be much more likely to report early. No factory could possibly obtain information as to the condition of its workers during the first three months of pregnancy excepting by the voluntary information of the workers themselves, and yet this is the period during which nearly all miscarriages occur, and is the most critical time during the whole period of pregnancy. No claim for compensation could possibly stand if it were shown that the factory authorities required the women to notify their condition to them as early as possible with a view to suitable work being found, and it would then be a woman's own fault if she continued her own heavy work against the known wishes of the management.

In our factory we have notices put in the changing houses and in the ambulance-rooms asking the women to notify the doctor as early as possible if they are pregnant, so that they may be placed on work which will avoid any risk of personal injury.

(d) The argument that the woman by doing other than her usual work is not worth her pay is answered by the statement that the disciplined and trained worker is more worth her pay even with a slight physical disability than the undisciplined and untrained worker who may take her place.

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The factory arguments in favour of keeping on such women are:—

(a) That good feeling will be promoted if the workers know that the management have their actual welfare at heart, and are not penalising them for natural physical disabilities.

(b) That this mutual good feeling will produce better workers.

(c) That miscarriages will be actually fewer in a factory where the conditions are known at an early date, as such accidents are thereby prevented, along with their subsequent disorganisation of the factory work.

THE WORKERS' POINT OF VIEW.

From the workers' point of view it seems to me that most arguments must be entirely in favour of being kept on. The most cogent reasons are:—

(a) The worker should not be turned away from work that she is quite able and competent to do because of her condition, excepting in cases where the work is very heavy, but as in our factory (and also, I should think, in most other factories) there is alternation of work, and as the same woman may do various kinds of work, some suitable employment can usually be found for her.

(b) The worker will not be tempted to take drugs or to use other means to provoke miscarriage if she is free from the fear of losing work where she can earn a good wage, and being obliged either to drop out of the labour market altogether or to take on duller and less highly paid work because she cannot do without the money. I have heard of cases in which the worker when dismissed from a factory because of her condition has, in order to obtain bare necessities, gone rag-picking on some refuse heap and got into such a bad condition that both she and the child have been in great danger at the time of the actual confinement.

(c) If the worker continues at her more highly paid work she can afford to save money for the time during which she will be laid by, and can also probably then afford to take a longer interval after the confinement, when the rest is all-important both to herself and the child.

(d) During the pre-confinement period, if she earns good money, she can enjoy the better food which is so necessary to her condition. She shares the company and fellowship of her companions, so necessary to keep her cheerful, and by walking a mile to work obtains plenty of exercise and fresh air. The maintenance of the mother in a fit state of health and spirits is all-important to the health of the child to which she is to give birth. Several of the workers are reported as never having felt so well during former pregnancies or having had such good confinements or such healthy babies. In no case has the actual nature of their employment had the slightest detrimental effect.

The woman's arguments against staying on might be:—

(a) In some cases she might not feel well enough to turn out to work and to travel to and fro, but if she does not really feel well enough to do so, she is practically free to leave.

(b) The fear that she might miscarry. This fear will very probably be dispelled if the worker notifies her condition. As a matter of fact, the tables which I have prepared and give here in summary show that of the very few cases of miscarriage that we have had—only 15, including 2 premature births, during the whole of the nine months—13 were at very early dates before the factory authorities could have taken any steps toward a dismissal, as they could not possibly have known of the condition except by the voluntary information of the worker herself. Only two occurred while actually at work. I believe that some factories have had a lot of trouble in this way, but we have never had any real trouble of that kind; one baby was actually born in the ambulance-room, as the woman had miscalculated, but as the ambulance-room was equal to the occasion this did not matter. Another threatened miscarriage was arrested by suitable treatment, and the pregnancy continued until full term.

(c) A reluctance to staying among her fellow-workers.

THE QUESTION OF MATERNAL WELFARE.

From the State point of view the greatest question of the present day is the increase of the human race and infant welfare. And any measures are to be encouraged which tend to promote the greater well-being of the mother before and at the time of confinement, and the health of the coming generation. If the woman can keep in a more healthy condition, be better fed and happier in cheerful surroundings, this is all for the good of the State and is likely to raise the birth-rate. I contend that a woman who is struggling for an existence and is debarred from earning a good wage simply through her condition is being discouraged instead of helped at a time when she deserves all possible aid. She is thereby thrown into a condition of anxiety at a time when worry is a detriment and she is prevented from

saving for a period of stress. In consequence the child suffers before and after birth.

Every working mother should be encouraged, if possible, to abstain from work for at least three months after confinement, so as to recover completely her normal state of health, and to nurse the baby during this time; but in practice this is very difficult, as the woman is often short of money and implores to be taken back. If the State can promote a scheme to keep the mother entirely in the home, so that she can feed and look after her children, so much to the good; but while she depends upon her individual exertion, no woman should be debarred from doing the best for herself and for unborn children. From a medical point of view reasonable work combined with exercise and good food are the proper preparation for childbirth.

I wish particularly to emphasise the fact that from a medical point of view no certain diagnosis of the woman's condition can be made during the first three months, unless she will tell you her own suspicions; and yet this is the period during which most risk is run and during which most miscarriages occur. Also this is the period in which measures are taken with a view to provoking miscarriage, if loss of work is feared, so that no factory can be free from such danger even if it dismisses all known cases of pregnancy, while the State will certainly be the loser of some of the coming generation.

SUMMARY OF RECORDS.

In the report that I have drawn up I have had 101 cases of women who became pregnant during the nine months of which I have kept records.

Of these 46 cases terminated successfully with 47 children before the end of February, 1918, when the report was made up. One woman had twins; 7 cases could not be traced but were all right when last heard of.

Thirty-four cases had not come off at the end of February, but of these 19 have terminated successfully since.

There were 2 premature births and 13 early abortions—that is, before the third month of pregnancy. Of the 2 premature cases one had operation for advanced carcinoma of cervix at 5 months and the other contracted syphilis at 6 months, the baby being born dead at 8 months.

The 13 miscarriages were all very early, from five to ten weeks. Of these, one patient fell out of bed while dreaming and miscarried three days later, another took "female pills" and fell downstairs, a third had had tuberculous trouble, and a fourth previous miscarriages.

It is very possible that other babies have been born who do not appear in my report, as other women may have had confinements without reporting their condition. It is, however, unlikely that there have been more miscarriages than I have recorded, as all workers who are absent for three days consecutively are visited at their homes and inquiries are made into the reason for such absence, so that miscarriages could hardly escape notice by reason of this factory regulation.

I am still keeping records of all such cases, and now that the workers do not fear dismissal and know that an interest is taken they willingly notify their condition. Thus they are kept under observation even after they leave, with the result that my next year's records will be more complete than those for the nine months to February, 1918. All the women whom I have seen since confinement report that they have had easy labours, healthy children, and that they never felt better while carrying.

One woman who worked until ten days before her confinement had the first healthy baby that she had ever had out of eight. Another had had 12 pregnancies, but only one other living child before this one. A third told me she had seven other children and that this was the healthiest one. All the women told me that they found the walk to work beneficial, and said that they had never felt so well before.

ARTS AND HANDICRAFTS EXHIBITION.—The exhibition which is organised annually by the *Englishwoman* will this year be held at the Central Hall, Westminster, from Nov. 13th to 23rd. The exhibition is designed to encourage home handicrafts, and has a distinct bearing on the employment of disabled soldiers. A number of social organisations, including the Church Army and the Y.M.C.A., use the exhibition for the sale of their hand-made productions.

THE LATE DR. J. S. COOPER.—The death occurred on August 15th, at his residence in Culter, of James Snowie Cooper, M.D. Aberd. After graduating at Aberdeen University in 1891 he practised for a time in Lancashire, and was then physician for three years at the Sanatorium, Banchory. Lately his health had precluded his practising his profession. He is survived by a widow, daughter of the late W. R. Bruce, D.D., minister of Newmachar, and one daughter.