

## The Maternity Allowance Act

The Federal Committee of the British Medical Association in Australia considered at its meeting held on July 19 and 20, 1922, a proposal . . . to the effect that the money now being doled out to the mothers in the Commonwealth should be utilized to greater advantage. Arguments have been adduced in these columns and elsewhere to show that the measure providing the five pound baby bonus has little real significance as a national movement and that much of the money has found its way into the drinking saloon and the pockets of the bookmaker. It has further been shown that the attitude of the originators of the movement was not genuine and that more attention was paid to the interests of the politicians than to those of the necessitous mothers. The Federal Treasurer is being pressed to economize, so that the drain on the taxpayers' pockets may be reduced. The maternity bonus has served its purpose and the Treasurer is prepared to reduce the amount spent each year as much as the people will stand without resentment. There has been much frank talk about this vote-catching expedient. The time has arrived for the medical profession to tender sound advice to the Government in regard to the most advantageous manner of improving the public health with the money at present wasted . . .

The Federal Committee has indicated the manner in which three-quarters of a million pounds sterling could be spent with a good prospect of reducing the maternal morbidity and mortality and the infantile mortality . . . The prevention at all events of the dangerous manifestations of certain pathological processes before, during and after labour can be effected by skilled and careful antenatal control. In order that the nation may benefit to the full extent by the application of these preventive measures, institutional supervision must be organized and provided. It will probably be a difficult problem to cater for the rural mothers. But since the future prosperity of Australia

depends on the development of her rural industries, ways and means must be found to place within the reach of every expectant mother in country as well as in urban districts the benefits of ante-natal care applied by skilled practitioners . . . In addition to those pathological processes which are regarded to-day as preventible, there are others which are less well understood. More especially is this true of the ante-natal influences affecting the unborn infant . . . Every penny that may be spent on the task of unravelling the mysteries of infantile asthenia, malnutrition, debility and similar conditions will be soundly invested. The return will be the saving of healthy Australian citizens . . . If the money now spent on the baby bonus is to be deflected to a more useful purpose, some of it must be ear-marked for an organized investigation into the causes of the high infantile death-rate. Many hygienists have admitted defeat in the past by indicating a certain level of infantile mortality as an irreducible minimum. Such an admission of failure is unjustifiable and must be denied by every trained scientist.

The sociological aspect of the problem had also a very important place in the scheme. It is useless to make provision for the proper care of the parturient woman in well-equipped hospitals, if the removal of the woman from her home means the neglect and consequent endangering of the other children in the home. It is essential that the woman shall have confidence in the temporary curatrix of her home. The psychical element may not be ignored, for it is very real and it leaves a lasting impression if it be defied. While the provision of help for mothers and expectant mothers in necessitous circumstances may not be a strictly medical matter, its importance is recognized by medical practitioners and the Federal Committee is performing its duty in calling the attention of the Government to it.

*Med J Aust 1922; 2: 161-162 [editorial]*