

CITY OF BIRMINGHAM.

# Report of the Medical Officer of Health

## FOR THE YEAR 1939

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### Introduction

The Ministry of Health have directed that in view of the exceptional pressure of work in the public health departments throughout the country, as a result of the war, and the need also for strict economy in the use of paper, only brief reports are to be made for the year 1939, on such essential and urgent matters as have affected the public health during the year. Hence follows the unusual form and brevity of this report, relating to a year clouded during its first half by the threat of war and the dominating need to prepare for it while still maintaining normal health services, and crowded during the remainder of its course with the intense effort of development and consolidation of the casualty services for civil defence, activities which have intimately concerned the public health departments.

During the earlier half of 1939 the process of preparing, opening and staffing first aid posts, of organizing first aid parties and ambulance services, of establishing a machinery for the training of volunteers for the newly-formed Civil Nursing Reserve, of arranging the casualty sections of the general hospitals and of adjusting their staffs to the new calls on them, and of supplying, storing and distributing equipment, in part from Government stocks and in part by local purchase, went on steadily and with growing concentration. The recruiting of fresh personnel for the various air raids precautions services, and the preliminary training in first aid and anti-gas measures, were carried out by the Air Raids Precautions Officer and his staff, in close collaboration with the Public Health Department, while similarly the technical and disciplinary aspects of the first aid party and ambulance personnel and equipment were dealt with by the A.R.P. Department, their medical aspects by the Public Health Department.

With the outbreak of war all these activities were almost violently intensified, while the immediate action of safeguarding buildings used for the casualty services, of establishing "black-out" arrangements, and of issue at very short notice of the stores reserved for that specific purpose, imposed a considerable strain for the moment on the Department. At the same time, a large-scale clearance of hospital beds, in part to the patients' own homes, in part to beds in hospitals away from Birmingham, was put into effect rapidly and with success; while the Public Health Department took its minor but nevertheless important share, in connection with mothers and young children, in the evacuation scheme organized by the Chief Education Officer and his department. Some reference to this will be made later.

Through all this heavy work, I have been deeply impressed with the wholehearted spontaneity with which every member of the staff of the Department has risen to the occasion, working untiringly and through long hours to meet the demands of the moment—all with a cheerfulness and willingness beyond praise.

It is not out of place to record at the same time the generous recognition by the Chairman and members of the Public Health Committee of the special calls on my own time, and their kindly agreement with necessary adjustments of my Committee duties to enable me to devote a maximum of attention to the insistent demands of these new and vitally important casualty services.

To counterbalance the great increase of work in the various new services mentioned above, there was a comparatively slight reduction of normal activities. The most conspicuous service jettisoned for the duration of the war was that of housing, in so far as this was concerned with slum clearance. The staff released thereby were, however, very quickly absorbed into A.R.P. duties, whole-time or part-time; and not only they, but also a very substantial proportion of the general and special inspectors and of the clerical staff. Of the health visitors, numbers accompanied the women and young children evacuated early in the war, and stayed for varying periods in the reception areas with them. A number of the City midwives and of the medical officers experienced in obstetrics also went out to reception areas to assist in the staffing of the maternity homes which, through the close collaboration of the County and City Medical Officers of Health of the reception areas, were opened, equipped and staffed at short notice for the reception of the expectant mothers transferred from the City. All these officers returned in due course, most of them before

the end of the year. While a number of health visitors have been seconded for general nursing duties in hospitals, the majority have been reserved, not only for their normal essential duties but also to provide a reserve of midwives to relieve and assist the City midwives in relation to precipitate labours liable to occur in air raids.

It has been of interest to note in how small a degree it has been found practicable to close down public health activities under war conditions, so almost uniformly essential are these services to the welfare of the population.

What has been the effect of war conditions of stress on the health of the City? The general statistics which next follow give little suggestion of any obvious damage to the health, and for the greater part indicate a growth in health. We were fortunate during the year in not being subjected to the strain of any major epidemic of infectious disease. Towards the end of the year there was a beginning of the marked increase in prevalence, here and elsewhere throughout the whole country, of cerebrospinal fever which occurred mainly during the earlier months of 1940. Apart from this, and, perhaps, from some increased prevalence of catarrhal infections, mainly mild, it would be difficult to point to any one item in the mortality or morbidity list of casualties as arising even indirectly from the war. That sentence must, however, be balanced by a further one, added a good deal later, to indicate that in August and September, 1940, a noticeably higher prevalence of deaths, at all ages, from respiratory disease, and of notifications of pneumonia, seems not improbably associated with the frequent use of shelters, with all their difficulties of crowding, of stagnant atmosphere, and of extremes of temperature, under the more acute air raid conditions of the summer of 1940.

The position should not therefore be regarded with too much complacency. The machine of public health administration and control is undoubtedly being subjected to a strain, both centrally and in the work of the private medical practitioner, on whose early intimation of the occurrence of infectious disease and of unusual ill-health so much depends. Staffs are depleted, work has increased, and there must necessarily be a reduction in the reserves capable of application to an emergency. We may hope that the City may be spared any unmanageable emergency in relation to its ordinary public health services, whatever it may be called on to endure in those other directions for which the new casualty services have been called into being.

I have referred above to my indebtedness to the Chairman and members of the Public Health Committee and to the staff of the Public Health

Department, for their unflinching and vigorous collaboration throughout the year. I should wish also to record my grateful thanks to the Air Raids Precautions Committee, the Public Works Committee, the Education Committee, the Parks Committee, the Public Assistance Committee, the Mental Hospitals Committee, the Salvage and Stables Committee, and the Markets and Fairs Committee and their respective Chief Officers for very much helpful co-operation and support. To the Town Clerk and his staff, to the City Surveyor and the A.R.P. Officer as my closest colleagues in other Departments in the most pressing pre-occupations of the year, I should like especially to express my thanks for their generous spirit of comradeship.

### Population

Data are not available for accurate estimation of population since the outbreak of war, for there is no measure, open to the Department, either of those who have left the City on military service, or of those who have entered it at the call of industry. We must therefore be content merely with recording the population as calculated for the mid-year (30th June, 1939), viz. :—

Medical Officer of Health's estimate (1939).....	1,055,000
Registrar-General's estimate (1938) .....	1,041,000

### Death Rate

During 1939 there were 12,003 deaths of Birmingham residents, which give a death rate of 11.4 per 1,000 of population compared with 10.9 for 1938.

### Birth Rate

Taking live births as 17,250, the birth rate is 16.4 of population, compared with 16.6 for 1938.

### Infant Mortality Rate

There were 1,031 infant deaths during 1939, which gives an infant mortality rate, based on the birth figures of the previous paragraph, of sixty per 1,000 births, as against sixty-one for last year. This is equal to the lowest rate ever attained in the City, reached previously only in 1930 and 1937.

### Maternal Mortality

A reduction is again recorded in the maternal mortality rate, as there were forty-three maternal deaths during 1939, giving a figure of 2.49 per 1,000 live births, against 2.81 for 1938. This rate has fallen with almost steady consistency since 1934.



## Maternity Homes and Wards

There has been a sustained demand for maternity beds in the City hospitals and maternity homes during the year. The number of confinements was as follows :—

	1939		1938
Dudley Road Hospital .....	1,113	..	1,454
Selly Oak Hospital .....	886	..	976
Wake Green Road Home .....	992	..	845
Heathfield Road Home .....	702	..	576

On the declaration of war all the main hospitals cleared large numbers of beds for the reception of air raid casualties. This led to a temporary reduction in the number of maternity beds available, with a consequent increase in pressure on the beds at the Municipal Maternity Homes in Wake Green Road, Moseley, and Heathfield Road, Handsworth.

Accordingly, Pype Hayes Hall Convalescent Home and Lordswood Nursery were constituted post-delivery Homes and patients were transferred from the Maternity Homes on about the fifth day of the puerperium to complete the lying-in period at a post-delivery Home.

The accommodation at Heathfield Road Maternity Home was further relieved by converting Bourne House Hostel into a Home for the treatment of ante-natal cases, freeing the corresponding section at the Maternity Home for ordinary labours.

Subsequently further improvement in maternity bed accommodation was effected, by an increase, in two successive stages, of the maternity beds available at Dudley Road Hospital. Since it proved essential to reserve, as a casualty block for A.R.P. purposes, the maternity block completed just before the war, it was found possible to convert certain other wards in the hospital for maternity purposes.

## Maternity and Child Welfare Centres

The work at Welfare Centres has proceeded generally on normal lines so far as peace-time activities are concerned, though with a necessary reduction in some clinics. There have been added, however, a number of war-time duties, including that of information bureau to women, centre of instruction in evacuation and general haven for women in difficulties. They are further being used (1940) extensively in connection with the National Milk Scheme.

### (a) *Distribution of Respirators*

On the outbreak of war the Air Raid Precautions Department requested that the Maternity and Child Welfare Centres should be used for the

distribution of gas helmets for babies. All health visitors had previously attended demonstrations on the method of fitting and using these respirators. It was arranged that no respirator should be issued to a mother until she had been fully instructed in its use. Posters were prepared giving the mother clear instructions as to the importance of learning the use of the apparatus and carrying out the instructions.

During the first few days the full supply of respirators was not available from the Government and, therefore, at all child welfare centres there were long queues of impatient women waiting to be supplied. However, this difficulty was soon overcome and distribution continued daily until the immediate demand was satisfied. These arrangements subsequently ceased and respirators for infants and young children are now issued through the air raid wardens.

*(b) Evacuation of Mothers and Young Children*

The Centres also played their part in this scheme, in close co-operation with the Education Department, which concentrated on the major problem of the evacuation of the school child.

The registration of the mothers wishing to be evacuated commenced in March, 1939, and was continued throughout the summer. School attendance officers visited and distributed registration cards. While this resulted in a large number of women filling up the cards, events showed that the majority of these were not decided in their intention of actually leaving the City. Before the outbreak of war there were approximately 30,000 women and children registered, and for their conveyance to the receiving areas sixty trains were chartered. Lists in quadruplicate were prepared for each train of the name and address of each person expected to travel, and as far as possible women from individual Birmingham districts were drafted to the same train.

The arrangements at the station included the provision of station marshals, medical officers, health visitors and voluntary workers. The special staff were provided with white armlets so that appeals could be very readily made for help.

The mothers with young children made their own way to the stations while buses were provided from the Child Welfare Centres for the expectant mothers. Six trains were reserved for expectant mothers, and on each of these a midwife travelled, while special maternity packages were provided including all necessities for an emergency delivery on the train.

On all the trains conveying women and children a health visitor

travelled as commandant, and subsequently remained with the women for a period in order to assist with the billeting.

The amount of work involved in this scheme was considerable ; and when put into operation it happily proved to work very smoothly. No accidents were reported, trains were on time and left without disorder.

The number of persons presenting themselves for evacuation was much below expectation. The actual number who left was only 12,499, including 406 expectant mothers, 4,135 other mothers, and 7,958 children.

Of the sixty health visitors who accompanied the evacuees twenty-eight remained in local billets to assist in the billeting. The periods they remained varied from two to twelve weeks.

### (c) *Precipitate Labours*

To meet the likelihood of precipitate labours in air raids, lists of the nearest available doctors and midwives, with directions as to immediate first aid and as to ambulances, have been posted in each public shelter, while selected health visitors have been provided with emergency outfits to supplement the work of City midwives under such conditions.

### **Infectious Diseases**

The following figures show admissions to the infectious diseases hospitals, viz. :—

	1939	1938
Scarlet Fever.....	511 ..	1,044
Diphtheria .....	1,134 ..	1,718
Enteric Fever .....	19 ..	11
Measles and German Measles .....	640 ..	162
Whooping Cough .....	290 ..	357
Chicken Pox .....	127 ..	85
Mumps .....	70 ..	35
Erysipelas .....	127 ..	133
Dysentery .....	64 ..	22
Miscellaneous .....	184 ..	69

Infectious diseases generally were less prevalent during 1939 than 1938, and with the main exception of cerebro-spinal meningitis, the number of cases notified was below the average for the previous ten years.

Measles and whooping cough were added to the list of diseases compulsorily notifiable by medical practitioners as from 23rd October, 1939.

The City Fever Hospital was made available for the admission from neighbouring counties of cases of cerebro-spinal meningitis in order to facilitate systematic treatment on modern lines.

### **Tuberculosis**

There has been an appreciable reduction in cases of tuberculosis notified during the year; the cases numbered 1,036 as against 1,209 in 1938; the reduction was noted both for pulmonary and for non-pulmonary tuberculosis. The number of deaths from this cause showed an increase, the number being 885 in 1939, compared with 813 in the previous year.

A period of peculiar difficulty in sanatorium administration was experienced at the outbreak of war, in connection with the policy of evacuation of a proportion of the patients then applied. This, however, righted itself before long and the beds began to be filled again with patients needing treatment.

### **General Hospitals**

It would be misleading to attempt the usual comparison of hospital activities with those of previous years, for the result would be stultified by the fact that at the outbreak of war 1,171 patients were cleared out of the City hospitals. These were in part discharged home, in part sent by ambulance trains to hospitals situated at varying distances from Birmingham. The process of transfer worked smoothly, and the co-operation between the Ministry's officers, local authority's staff, casualty hospitals, ambulance services, St. John Ambulance Association, first aid parties, railway authorities, ambulance train personnel and receiving hospitals proved most satisfactory. Later in the year the empty beds were again released for ordinary civil use. The demand for hospital beds, however, remained abnormally low for a considerable period.

Some movement of hospital medical and nursing staff proved necessary to provide the nucleus of staff for the "up-grading" of a number of other institutions into casualty hospitals. In all this the staffs have shown the most willing co-operation.

Much work was involved in the structural preparation of the hospitals and allied institutions against air raids.

### **Sanitary Inspection and Housing**

During the year 160,249 visits were made by the general sanitary inspectors, as compared with 190,304 in 1938. The reduction was due in part to the fact that at the outbreak of war representations of areas and



individual houses under the Housing Act were curtailed, with a consequent reduction in systematic house inspections, and in part to the great reduction in inspectors available. A proportion disappeared on military service, while a very large section of the remainder were absorbed into whole-time or part-time duties in A.R.P. casualty services, in connection with liaison work at first aid posts, works connected with the protection of hospitals and other buildings, the organization of a decontamination laundry, work at Control Centres, and in a number of other directions.

The work of the special inspectors in connection with canal boats, smoke nuisances, Shops Acts, milk shops and stores, and the sampling of food, drugs and water, was substantially maintained during the year. 44,827 visits were paid in 1939, as against 46,687 in 1938; a most creditable record when the severe disturbance in their work and the reduction in the numbers of inspectors is borne in mind.

In relation to housing, during the first eight months of the year seventy-two Clearance Areas were represented under Section 25 of the Housing Act, 1936 (approximately 4,090 houses), and approved by resolution of the City Council. Twenty-two Clearance Orders and sixty-eight Compulsory Purchase Orders were made and submitted to the Ministry of Health for confirmation. In addition, action was taken under Section 11 of the Housing Act in regard to 148 houses, and under Section 12 in regard to twenty-four dwellings.

At the outbreak of war the majority of the members of the housing staff were seconded for A.R.P. duties in Control Centres and Casualty Services, while both the Chief Housing Inspector (Mr. Lamb) and in succession to him on departure for military service his deputy (Mr. Pardoe) have undertaken the onerous duties of Organizer of First Aid Posts. On the 8th September, 1939, Circular 1866 was issued by the Ministry of Health suggesting the postponement of work under the Slum Clearance programmes, as a result of which the City Council on the 17th October resolved that Slum Clearance activities be postponed and that action towards closure and demolition should be taken only (a) in those cases in which the dwellings were in such a condition as to be liable to cause positive harm to the health of the inmates, (b) where these conditions were incapable of being remedied. Under these categories action has been taken under Section 11 or 12 of the Housing Act in twenty-five cases.

## Analytical and Bacteriological Laboratories

The samples dealt with by these Departments were as follows :—

<i>Analytical</i>		<i>Bacteriological</i>	
1939	1938	1939	1938
7,266	7,347	85,717	90,162

To both Departments the war has brought special problems and difficulties and the City Bacteriological Laboratory in particular has its close links with the medical services available to the public who become casualties in air raids.

## Venereal Diseases

The City Clinics continued to function throughout the year. Contrary to expectation the war did not lead, by the end of the year, to any increase in the numbers, whether of men or of women, seeking treatment. On the other hand, the effect of treatment of gonorrhœal cases with sulphonamide drugs was such as to justify discontinuance of routine irrigation for male patients, with the result that their attendances were nearly halved, to the great benefit of the patients.

The beneficent educational activities of the Birmingham Branch of the British Social Hygiene Council have been pursued with much energy, both individually and collectively, by personal interviews and by addresses to many groups of adolescents, of factory workers and others.

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COUNCIL HOUSE,  
BIRMINGHAM.

*September, 1940.*