PREGNANT WOMEN AT WORK

PREGNANT WOMEN AT WORK

Edited by

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Foreword

Sir James Watt
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Sir Richard Doll once warned crusaders about the formidable hurdles they can expect to encounter in their attempts to protect patients against health hazards. The value of preventive measures may be extremely difficult to prove: they necessarily enter the cost-benefit equation, but costs and benefits are as much susceptible to subjective assessment as to objective quantification. Ultimately, preventive measures may prove so expensive that authorities might prefer to spend the money on clinical care with its more tangible benefits¹. Nevertheless, despite such discouragement, Williams has suggested that we are effectively safeguarding the patient's welfare when 'the most valuable thing that we are not doing is less valuable than the least valuable thing that we are doing'².

One problem in our modern society is that more women are working in pregnancy in a wide variety of occupations. They are concerned about the effects of their work on the outcome of pregnancy. What information there is about the hazards of working at this time is spread diffusely, and large areas exist where we have no firm answers. Because of the importance of this aspect of preventive health, the Royal Society of Medicine and the Royal Society of Medicine Foundation made it the subject of their 1983 Anglo-American Conference. The idea was inspired by the interest of Professor Geoffrey Chamberlain, who has drawn attention to apparent anomalies and conflicting observations which raise many questions, but provide few answers³. Strictly comparable data have been difficult to obtain, owing to the large number of variables, such as age, social class, marriage patterns, family size, social benefits, antenatal screening, the nature of the work and the transportation conditions, management philosophy, staffing facilities, diet, national traditions of employment and the effectiveness or otherwise of safety regulations in different countries.

The participants of the conference obviously realised this during the spirited discussion, the hallmark of a meeting's success; the speakers were subjected to searching probes and suggestions for action from a particularly well-informed and perceptive audience. It became evident that a collaborative and integrated

approach to the problems of pregnant women at work will be necessary, involving practical industrial measures, effective legislation, education and research. The Editor, Professor Geoffrey Chamberlain, is therefore to be congratulated upon arranging the publishing of the proceedings of this symposium with a minimum of delay.

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Preface

The catalyst for this book was the Anglo-American Conference held in the summer of 1983 at the Royal Society of Medicine in London. These conferences are held alternately in London and Washington, their purpose being to bring together experts from both sides of the Atlantic to discuss subjects which have repercussions in each country. On this occasion the subject chosen was that of how the work a woman does in pregnancy may affect her health or that of her unborn child. It was decided that we should take the opportunity of bringing so many experts together to produce a volume on the subject in parallel with the meeting. Those speaking came from many disciplines, including obstetrics, epidemiology, pathology, toxicology, occupational health and the law. They each had at their fingertips original and published material from their own discipline, much of which was unknown to those who worked in other aspects of the subject. In consequence, each speaker was asked to contribute a chapter on that aspect of the subject in which he or she was expert, so that one volume could be produced containing material that would be of help to anyone wishing to look into the subject in the future. Particular value is in the large numbers of references given by each contributor, which may lead to further reading.

One of the values of a conference such as 'Pregnant Women at Work' is that it stimulates ideas for doing further research. Each of us realises the deficiencies of our own present knowledge, and the stimulation of meeting other people with slightly different approaches to the same subject produces ideas for new projects. It is hoped that, by disseminating more widely the ideas of the contributors to this conference, others might be able to react to the stimulation. It was decided not to publish the discussion which occurred after each paper, but the editor has grouped together some of the issues considered in a concluding chapter entitled 'Adverse influences of the working environment'.

No volume of this nature could be produced without a lot of co-operation from many workers. The editor is grateful to all the contributors who produced their manuscripts so promptly and allowed publication to proceed at a brisk

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pace. He is grateful to The Macmillan Press, the publishers, for their expeditious dealing with the matter. Finally, all of us owe a debt to Miss Muriel Mitchell of the Royal Society of Medicine, who so ably organised the conference and whose grasp of the principles and details of running such a meeting has proved invaluable to many at the RSM.

London, 1984

G. C.