

THE MATERNITY GRANT—ROOM FOR REFORM?

Almost all mothers can get £25 maternity grant

Department of Health and Social Security (1974a). National poster.

“The maternity grant is to help you with the general expense of having your baby” says the Department of Health and Social Security (1974b) in its leaflet on maternity benefits. Simultaneously posters prominently display the words “almost all mothers can get £25 maternity grant.”

Few people would oppose such a grant for such a reason, so it is all the more surprising to find that many women who are pregnant are excluded from receiving it. The main groups which are *not* eligible at present are: single women who have not completed enough contributions, divorced women in the same position, some wives whose husbands are in prison, young married women whose husbands have not completed enough contributions, and all schoolgirls.

On the other hand the grant is paid without difficulty to the vast majority of married women regardless of how rich their husbands may be.

The end result, which does not seem to be intended by anyone, is that the groups which are deprived of this money are those which include many of those most socially deprived, some of whom may have special needs. Nor, as some general practitioners have recently discovered, are these women always able to claim supplementary benefit.

These exclusions call into question the wisdom of linking the maternity grant to the system of insurance contributions. Why not simply pay it to all women who are having babies, on production of a certificate similar to that which is already required? In these days of female emancipation is it either wise or fair to require a woman's right to a maternity benefit to depend on a man?

The present system seems curiously illogical since it satisfies neither end of the political spectrum. On the one hand, those politically on the left of centre favour a universal benefit whereby all women would receive the grant. This would, of course, include all those listed above. On the other hand, those politically on the right of centre would favour a selective payment of grants to those in social need. This, too, would include most of these groups. Paradoxically therefore those women who are now denied the grant ought to get it according to both philosophies.

General practitioners make their diagnoses in physical, psychological, and social terms and the latter now include social stresses. Some practitioners who have recently tried to help these patients apply for these social grants have become aware of some of the complexities.

How much longer will government posters advertise that “almost all mothers” are entitled to receive this grant while in practice some of the most socially deprived mothers in our society are prevented from getting it?

REFERENCES

- Department of Health and Social Security (1974a). National poster advertising maternity benefits.
 Department of Health and Social Security (1974b). *National Insurance maternity benefit and credits*.
 Leaflet NI 17A. February. P2.
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