

Social Class

When I replied in haste to the article by John Bibby in the last newsletter, I didn't have any references to hand so I should like to take the opportunity of adding these in this time round.

The main source of data on mortality classified by social class is the Registrar General's Decennial Supplements on Occupational Mortality which relate the occupations of those people who die in census year and the one (sometimes two) years preceding and following it. Since 1911 the decennial supplements have included analyses in which the occupations have been aggregated into social classes. Of course, not only do the names of occupations vary from census to census, but so also does the way in which they are classified into social classes. As well as this, a person's occupation may not be given in the same way on their death certificate as it was at the previous census, even if they did not change job in between. The decennial supplement for 1971 which is due out this autumn is expected to contain detailed information about these problems, all of which have to be thought about before we can even start to think of ideological ones.

The decennial supplement will also contain analyses of infant mortality, but tabulations by maternal age and parity are usually only done as part of special studies based on OPCS' birth and death registrations (1,2). Neither of the two referred to could be described as recent. Perhaps it is time another one saw the light of day. Of course, even when we have these data tabulated by social class, the statistical problems are not over, as has been shown yet again by a recent American study (3).

All the same, I can only conclude by reiterating John's point that there is a great dearth of information about social class and health (or lack of it, as that is what we attempt to measure) in official statistics. All the same what would we do with it if we had it, as we already know that the relative position of social classes is not improving, to say the least? As none other than the Minister of State for Health and Social Security has become aware of the lack of these data (4) and has set up a committee to derive some, we might ask what he wants it for (apart from giving him a stick to beat his conservative successor who will presumably be the person to receive the committee's report). Does he share the belief that many of us hold, that the relative situation of social classes is unlikely to change without major political change? But as it would be naive in the extreme to think that such changes are imminent, or that they will be sufficient in themselves to redress the situation, perhaps we need data to look at the mechanisms more closely.

Alison Macfarlane

References

1. Heady, J.A., Heasman, M.A. (1959) 'Social and biological factors in infant mortality', General Register Office, Studies on Medical and Population Subjects no. 15.
2. Spicer, C.C. Lipworth, L. (1966) 'Regional and social factors in infant mortality', General Register Office, Studies on Medical and Population Subjects no. 19.
3. Resseguié, Laurence J, 'The artefactual nature of effects of maternal age on risk of stillbirth', Journal of Biosocial Science, 9, 2, 191-200 (1977)
4. Labour Party Press Release S70/77 (27/3/77) Speech by David Ennals to Socialist Medical Association.

and Official