

The context of the worrying rise in 1986 in the infant mortality rate for England and Wales was described in a British Medical Journal editorial on January 23 1988. What follows is intended to supplement that by highlighting some of the points and relating them to the way the issue has been raised in political debate. For definitions of the various mortality rates, see the editorial.

1. Although attention has been focussed on the rise in the infant mortality rate in 1986, it might be better not to go on making too much of this, as figures for 1987 may show that it has gone down a bit again. There is a much firmer basis for pointing to trends over the past two or three years. These show a halt in the steady decline in infant mortality in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Unless the figures for 1987 show a really drastic decrease, they will be part of this levelling off.

2. The Tories point endlessly to the rapid decrease in perinatal mortality since 1979. What they fail to mention, though, is that the quicker downturn dates back to 1976 and has tailed off from 1984 onwards.

3. There is at present no basis for the statement that the rise in 'Britain's infant mortality rate.....is in contrast with the rest of Europe where rates are falling.' Firstly, in Scotland, which is part of Britain, the rate fell in 1986. Next, comparable figures have not yet been compiled for all European countries, so no one knows what is happening. As the pattern of falling perinatal mortality and static postneonatal mortality has been seen in other countries, there is no guarantee that there hasn't been a rise in infant mortality somewhere else. International comparisons are also difficult as countries have different registration laws. Finally, on a political level, we are not the only European country to be afflicted with an unhealthy right wing government!

