

# Immunisation: Drugs gain on child diseases

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By Dr C P ANYON  
Family doctor

**I**N this highly developed country we tend to become excited about campaigns for the eradication of infectious diseases that are of comparatively minor significance compared with the great killers and maimers of yesteryear — polio, tetanus, diphtheria, smallpox and the like — some of which still stalk many parts of Earth.

## HEALTH

And diseases such as scarlet fever, which decimated the child population a century ago, now are so mild and comparatively harmless that we pay little heed to them. We tend to forget that children equivalent in number to the population of this country (three million) die unimmunised each year around the world.

Enormous progress has had to be made to reach this, to us, still astronomical number of children dying per year, but even greater rewards can be expected as immunisation proceeds apace.

It's now believed that a fitting gift from the 20th century to the 21st century will be the elimination of polio, just as smallpox was

eliminated some years ago. And it's believed too that with the development of better vaccines, better in the sense that more vaccines will be combined in one shot, that the vaccines will be more readily produced. They will be more pure and they will be more competent and more available at a very reasonable price. Still further progress will be made.

Getting the vaccine to the children is obviously a vast problem for developing countries, many of whom have very poorly developed health services. But all these potential difficulties are being attacked and it's estimated that with widespread immunisation, and with better delivery services and better standards of living, some 11 million children will be "saved" each year. It sounds a very desirable objective. And one of which humankind should be proud, if achieved.

And it makes us realise just how sophisticated we are, and how fortunate we are in this country when we read of the calamitous health of children in many other countries. It does make us wonder whether the outcries for new immunisations for some diseases are sometimes based more on emotion than reason.

We've now reached the stage where we can tidy up the coro-

nary arteries in middle-age of those individuals who have been survivors from their immunised childhood, and allowed to eat themselves, if you believe current theories, into a state of artery decline. It makes you wonder about the future of the 11 million children "saved" each year around the world.

What are we letting them in for with our efforts? Will the so-called benefits of Western civilisation (for that's how we judge it all), really turn out to be benefits in the long run.

These simple questions are troubling indeed.

Meanwhile, while we grow enthusiastic over yet more vaccination campaigns here, let's remember that while the immediate objectives are sometimes fine, the long-term results may be somewhat different.

No, I'm not advocating non-immunisation, just wondering about what kind of a life we will provide for these children. Presumably, it will be immediately better than the current or immediately anticipated one, but it may yet turn out to be a poor legacy from us to them. The 20th century can and will bequeath all sorts of things to the 21st century.

Giving these children the chance to survive in our world may not, at the risk of being unduly morbid, turn out to be the big bonus we would like. □