

Medicine by John Grauerholz, M.D.

The whooping-cough vaccine shortage

Scared parents and opponents of mass vaccination could just succeed in bringing the dread disease back.

Over the past year, there have been numerous reports of an impending, and now actual, shortage of DTP vaccine, which immunizes children against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, otherwise known as whooping cough. This is a result of the fact that only one pharmaceutical company, Lederle of Pearl River, New York, is actively producing and distributing the vaccine.

The shortage of vaccine is a result of a series of multimillion-dollar lawsuits by parents of children who suffered complications from the whooping-cough vaccine. While whooping-cough vaccine is generally quite safe, and highly effective, it is responsible for one to two deaths and approximately 32 cases of brain damage among each 10 million children immunized.

Before vaccination, whooping cough was a leading cause of childhood deaths in the United States, accounting for 7,518 deaths among 265,000 cases in the United States in 1934. Currently, approximately 2,500 cases are reported in the United States each year with about 45 deaths. Even this reduced rate is significantly higher than the morbidity associated with the vaccine, which causes about 43 cases of severe reactions among 13.5 million annual doses.

Rare reactions to the vaccine were first reported in 1974 and a debate over the safety of the vaccine has raged since then. After the initial reports, immunization levels in Britain, where vaccination is optional, dropped to 30%

and two major outbreaks of the disease occurred.

In the United States, resistance to vaccination was less prevalent until recently, when it has increased as a result of agitations by various "holistic medicine" and "public interest" groups. Their efforts bore fruit last September and October when an epidemic of 225 confirmed cases of whooping cough broke out in Seattle.

The reaction of the "medical environmentalists" such as Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, an Illinois pediatrician and a critic of the vaccine, was to charge physicians with creating fears of an epidemic to promote business. According to Mendelsohn, "Vaccinations are the lifeblood of pediatrics. Without vaccines, patients wouldn't come into their offices." His reaction to the Seattle cases was to deny their existence.

It is precisely the success of the vaccine which has made parents—who have never seen the devastating effects of whooping cough—susceptible to the propaganda of the anti-vaccination lobby. According to Dr. Alan Hinmann, director of the Centers for Disease Control's Division of Immunization, "The reason we don't have a problem is because of the vaccines we've been using. And unless we use these vaccines we'll have a problem again. The benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks."

The consequences of inadequate vaccination can be seen in Ibero-America, where whooping cough still

ranks high among causes of infant death. As the health and sanitary infrastructure of many urban areas in the United States collapses, the consequences will be amplified by lack of vaccination.

The American Medical Association at its annual meeting in Chicago voted in favor of a committee report calling for a federal fund to pay for care of vaccine victims. The AMA took the position that it is impossible to make a vaccine or drug that is completely safe. Therefore, the government should protect manufacturers from expensive lawsuits stemming from rare side effects. Considering the potential consequences of lack of vaccination, and the extremely small number of cases, this is a reasonable proposal.

Attacks on this proposal have come from Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), chairman of the House health subcommittee and one of the leading anti-technology and pro-euthanasia members of Congress, and from the Heritage Foundation, which runs the "right" side of the anti-technology movement.

Waxman's argument that federal compensation will destroy incentive to develop safer vaccines is simply an attempt to give a plausible reason for not dealing with the situation, and gives the lie to so-called arguments about cost-benefit analysis. By any such analysis, vaccination against whooping cough produces benefits overwhelmingly greater than the real costs of rare side effects.

In the case of the Heritage Foundation, their advocacy of liability suits to improve product safety is, at the least, an attempt to justify the kind of litigation costs that will justify the withdrawal of the drug industry from vaccine manufacture and the raising of costs to levels which will preclude mass vaccination.