

## Old killers Australian children die of Third World diseases

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# Australian children dying for want of immunisation

CANBERRA — Australia is being tragically reminded that old killers never die. In hospitals around the country children are fighting the return of whooping cough in a grim battle not all win: last month a six-year-old boy died in Sydney, the third death in New South Wales in three months.

Another 42, according to federal health officials, have been killed by measles in the past two years. Immunisation rates that have plunged below some Third World countries raise further fears of new epidemics of diseases such as polio and diphtheria.

Said the Federal Health Minister, **Michael Wooldridge**: "In Australia we are now starting to see again babies who are born deformed because of German measles, **one in every 4000 unimmunised kids dying from whooping cough, and young men becoming sterile because of the complications of measles.**"

Finding an answer is not easy. A new national immunisation strategy is being prepared, and a range of proposals to lift the rate of immunisation is now being prepared, including the possibility of paying parents for each injection administered to their child under the immunisation schedule.

Others are more drastic. Dr Wooldridge has proposed banning children who have not been immunised from enrolling in schools, an option which, while winning support from the Australian Medical Association, has met with resistance from the state Education Ministers who will meet later this month to discuss the move.

The Federal Schools Minister, David Kemp, said children who had not been

**Plunging immunisation rates are raising fears of deadly child epidemics, reports Canberra bureau chief GREG ANSLEY.**

immunised risked the health of other children as well as their own. The states, despite a proposed exemption for parents opposed to immunisation on moral or religious grounds, have balked at mandatory jabs and prefer a less coercive approach.

Opponents of immunisation are also rallying against the concept of vaccination as a condition of schooling. In Melbourne the Australian Vaccination Network handed documents to Dr Wooldridge's office, claiming to detail more than 200 serious reactions and deaths from child immunisation.

"It's time the Government acknowledged that the freedom to determine whether vaccines are administered rests with the parents, not with the medical lobby," said network president Meryl Dorey.

Reluctance to immunise is significantly entrenched. According to a survey last year by the Bureau of Statistics, a third of the parents who had not immunised their children against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough, and a quarter of those failing to immunise against polio, were opposed to immunisation, were worried about side-effects, or were advised against it.

Complacency also played a large role.

The immunisation survey, the first in five years, **showed continued high immunisation rates of 90 per cent or**

**higher for measles and mumps and 82 per cent for polio, but much lower rates for rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, and Hib meningitis. The overall rate for full immunisation against all diseases on the recommended schedule is now just 53 per cent — well below developing countries such as China and Vietnam.**

For a country which now wants to add hepatitis C to the immunisation list for all babies and pre-teens, the outlook is grim unless the trend can be reversed, possibly by a combination of policy and technology.

At present Australian children need six sets of injections by the age of four to be fully immunised against diseases such as polio, diphtheria, measles, rubella, mumps, whooping cough and tetanus. But the Statistics Bureau's survey shows that even among parents who start off well, immunisation rates fall noticeably by the time children reach the age of two.

Researchers hope they can tackle this by king-hit injections. One reason children are so well-protected against measles and mumps, they believe, is the single-dose vaccine used for the two diseases. At Sydney's New Children's Hospital, researchers hope to perfect in two years a five-in-one vaccine against whooping cough, Hib meningitis, diphtheria, tetanus and hepatitis B.

In the meantime, Australia faces serious difficulties. **Up to 150 children could die this year from whooping cough because they were not immunised against it, says Dr Wooldridge.**