

Measles used to be considered a normal and generally manageable disease of childhood. So why are parents being scared into immunising their children against it? NICOLA LEGAT discovers that health officials aren't telling parents everything they need to know.

"SHOULD NEW ZEALANDERS, especially parents, feel fear of the epidemic... currently sweeping the country, that feeling should, by all rights, pale to insignificance beside the shame they should also be suffering from. No excuse — and least of all sheer apathy — can justify the fact that the disease was allowed to become an epidemic, even less that it should needlessly claim the lives of several children... the loss of those lives should now be on the conscience of the whole country."

Thus thundered a leader writer in the *Northern Advocate* earlier this year, not about the bubonic plague, black death or poliomyelitis, but measles.

The Health Department could not have hoped for a more stentorian ally (despite its inaccuracy: three young children — not several — died of measles-related causes) in its battle to arrest what it termed an epidemic of measles which began in Wellington in early July and was, officials claimed, continuing into September with 4500 cases officially notified.

However, this figure substantially underestimates the situation as measles is not a notifiable disease. The official figures collated by the Centre for Disease Control in Porirua are based on voluntary reports by general practitioners and so do not include cases not notified, for whatever reason by doctors, or children who are cared for at home without referral to a doctor.

A school survey at the height of the outbreaks in August by Dr Lester Calder, deputy medical officer of health for the Auckland Area Health Board's central district, showed that the actual number of cases was between five and 10 times the reported figure. Using this as a guide, health officials estimate that between five and 10,000 Auckland children have had measles this last winter.

THIS IS WHAT the Department of Health brochure *Your Child And MMR* says about measles: "Measles is very easily passed from one child to another. It can make your child very sick. Measles shows up as a spotty red rash, high fever, runny nose, cough and sore, watery eyes. This can last for about a week. Measles can have serious complications such as chest or ear infections, or brain damage. Some children die of these complications."

Further on, the brochure advises parents and caregivers that they should also talk to their doctor, Plunket or public health nurse about the disease and the injection before their child is immunised, but for most parents those ominous initial words will continue to reverberate: "Some children die of these complications."

Death by measles was a prominent and constant element in the media coverage of the epidemic during July, August and September, although in general the press handled this aspect responsibly.

The major lapse came, predictably, from the *Star*. Under the headline "Jab Rush Over Killer Measles", reporter Lynley Bilby wrote, "Auckland parents are rushing to get children vaccinated against measles as the epidemic creeps nearer. Emergency vaccine is due to arrive in the city within the next 24 hours as doctors prepare to combat the spread of the virus that has already claimed the life of a Wellington child."

Health Department officials say they did not intend to scare people either about measles or into immunising their children, and that they deplore the use of such emotive language by the media.

However, there's no doubt that the *Star* tack definitely

measles

on elm street

helped the cause — as did the reports of gymnast Nikki Jenkins ill in her bed in Indianapolis with measles.

But it was not helpful to parents who wanted a clear picture of the threat measles might pose to the health of their children, particularly very young babies who can be vulnerable to the measles-related complications of middle-ear infection, severe chest infection and pneumonia (which is what caused the first

In 1854, measles killed 400 North Island Maori. In 1893, 511 of all races died from measles.

In the Third World, measles is still a killer of malnourished children whose poor state of health and lack of access to antibiotics make it difficult to fight off chest infections and pneumonia which is often a sequel to the onset of measles, and where poor access to hospital care means that measles-associated encephalitis (in-

saw thousands of children put into calipers are now the stuff of history. Shouldn't vaccine "save us" from measles in the same way?

During July and August the daily papers were happy to run press releases from area health boards giving updates on the number of cases and reminding parents that vaccination was essential for protection against infection. The press releases were invariably matter-of-fact, but they still insisted on painting the picture of a steadily growing number of cases, an inexorable advance which could only be repelled by immediate vaccination.

The Health Department's goal, towards which it single-mindedly set itself, is eradication of the disease. It was distinctly hostile towards anyone who might deflect the public from that course.

ONE PERSON IT did not want to be engaged in a public debate with is Hilary Butler, an independent researcher into non-immunisation.

Butler, 37, lives in Tuakau with her husband and two young sons. She has no professional medical background but began independent research into vaccination 10 years ago. Butler essentially believes that the side effects of vaccine, though slight, are not worth the risk. She also believes that well cared for, loved and nourished children are perfectly able to cope with measles; that its depiction as a killing and maiming disease is a huge distortion of the evidence.

Hilary Butler draws much of her American information from two key contacts: with the late Dr Robert Mendelsohn, a paediatrician, former

associate professor of preventive medicine and community health at the University of Illinois medical school, author of several books and prominent leader of the anti-vaccination lobby in the States; and Dr Antony Morris, a virologist who formerly worked for the American Food and Drug Administration and who now works independently on vaccination issues.

In July, as publicity about the epidemic increased, *Holmes* invited Hilary Butler to appear on the show to discuss the measles



Hilary Butler... believes anti-measles vaccination isn't worth the risk of possible side effects.

death, of a nine-month-old baby, in Wellington).

HISTORICALLY and currently the measles virus — medically named morbilli — has been a killer. In the United States in 1923, 10,314 people died from measles-related causes.

In this country, early contact between Maori and Pakeha exposed the tribes to influenza and measles for the first time and thousands died.

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flammation of the brain) is generally associated with permanent brain damage or death.

Thus it's a disease any health official might want to add to a wish list of eradicables. In the past, the advent of vaccines — combined, importantly, with vast improvements in personal hygiene, living standards and sanitation, have made great advances against diseases which once killed and maimed thousands. They have had great success in many areas: the dreaded polio epidemics of the 50s which worldwide

