

Meningitis: a campaign goes astray

by Finlay Macdonald

Meningococcal meningitis hit the headlines recently when the Health Department conducted its first mass vaccination campaign for 25 years. Some children suffered side-effects that have still not been explained. The department has been accused of using bribery instead of informative publicity to get its message across. And a large question remains: why is a killer disease associated with poverty posing such a threat to our children?

CHAD HEASLIP is not a clumsy child. That's why his mother, Le-Anne, was surprised when the two-year-old woke one morning very disoriented. He fell down steps, and at night he rolled off the bench-top where he sits while Le-Anne cooks dinner. She put him to bed about 7.30 and when she woke him an hour later to find he was feverish, she headed straight for the urgent doctor. Two days earlier, on May 28, Chad had been vaccinated for meningococcal meningitis. "When I walked out to take him to the doctor," says Le-Anne, "I said to my husband I guarantee it's a reaction to that vaccine."

The doctor found Chad was slightly red in one ear, though not enough to be associated with disorientation, and told his mother it was not the vaccine. "He said it was definitely not that," she remembers, "the vaccine was 100% safe."

But Chad just wouldn't get better. Two weeks later he got a cold, and then a dose of tonsillitis. He has all his teeth, but he began to dribble like a younger child. And the fevers were still coming every couple of days. By now, and maybe not surprisingly, his behaviour had changed completely. He became naughty, irritable, he was grizzly and clingy, and he moped about the house with a dummy and pillow. He was already taking antibiotics for tonsillitis, but he seemed no better, and so Le-Anne again visited the doctor. This time it was fluid in the ears and more antibiotics. On July 9 at 11.00am she discovered Chad couldn't walk.

"He was laying face down playing with his trucks and he went to stand up and fell forward onto his elbows and started to scream. So I rushed over and picked him up. I stood him there and stepped back and he just dropped — he didn't even put

his feet flat to the ground, he just flopped."

Le-Anne put Chad to bed, but when she woke him over three hours later he still couldn't walk. She went to change his pants and found his groin was tight and swollen. She rushed him straight to the doctor who told her to take him to Middlemore Hospital. X-rays, blood and urine tests proved nothing, but hospital staff suggested Chad was play-acting for attention because of his three-month-old baby sister. "He's like any kid," says Le-

Anne, "he'd pull her hair to get my attention and that, but now he's just so protective of her. That just didn't wash." By the time they left the hospital eight hours later, Chad was walking — "with a limp, he was staggering".

Things looked better the next day — Chad was still dragging one leg, but he looked okay. He had colour in his face. About 10.00am Le-Anne undressed him for a bath and he passed out. She rang her doctor who advised her to let him sleep. Chad is a light sleeper and, when

the dog barked at the postie and he didn't wake, Le-Anne thought it strange. "I tried to wake him and he wouldn't wake. I rang my husband to come round and my mother came over. We just shook him, and he woke up — it was about an hour later and he just shook all over. So I made him walk to his room and I dressed him. I sat him on the couch and, just like clicking your fingers, he went berserk."

"He kicked doors with his bare feet, he did forward rolls, backward rolls — it was unbelievable, like a split personality. And the way he was kicking furniture you'd swear he didn't feel it, because he's a bit of a sook. And I had a woman here with a little girl looking after my three-month-old, because I wasn't managing very well, and he just walked up to this girl and slapped her — hit her a beauty — and they've been really good friends basically from birth.

"And what knocked him out of it was my mother hit him and knocked him out, and he just snapped out just like that and was right back to his old self. But he did it for about half an hour before we realised what was going on."

Chad was ill for most of the five weeks after he was vaccinated. In that time he was diagnosed as having ataxia (dysfunction in the nervous system causing "drunken" behaviour) and croup (a disease of the larynx and trachea in children) — both relatively serious conditions.

Chad Heaslip is a lot better now, but his mother is still anxious. Her own mother rings every morning and every night to see that Chad is all right. Like a growing number of people, Le-Anne is deeply dissatisfied with the Health Department's handling of the mass vaccination campaign against meningococcal meningitis in Auckland, and their reaction to the subsequent reports of unusual and unexpected side-effects.

MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS is an acute bacterial infection of the mem-



Le-Anne and Chad Heaslip: "just like clicking your fingers, he went berserk".

