

# BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

SATURDAY 9 DECEMBER 1978

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*Correspondents are urged to write briefly so that readers may be offered as wide a selection of letters as possible. So many are being received that the omission of some is inevitable. Letters must be signed personally by all their authors.*

*As stated each week in "Instructions to authors" no letter will be acknowledged unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.*

## Return of whooping cough

SIR,—As a final-year medical student I have just completed a short attachment to the infectious diseases unit at the City Hospital, Edinburgh. Within only four weeks I saw the number of admissions with whooping cough rise from about six to 18, as a result of which the hospital was forced to reopen an entire ward to be set aside specifically for whooping cough.

It is disturbing to think that, ironically, I was told as a junior student I should be lucky even to see a case of whooping cough before I graduated. The reason for this rapid increase in the incidence of the disease must be directly attributable to the dramatic decline in immunisation against it. Those doctors who in recent years have been too quick to point out the dangers of immunisation—unjustifiably, I feel, and often on the basis of rather dubious statistical evidence—must be held responsible. Moreover, a great deal of speculative and sensational publicity, based on the lay knowledge of the journalist, has (not surprisingly) deterred mothers from immunising their children. Should this continue the dramatic consequences will become obvious within the next five years.

In the first place, general practitioners who have seen a marked reduction in the incidence of whooping cough have referred directly to hospital, and quite rightly, those isolated

cases with medical or social difficulties which make home care impossible. With an increase in the incidence of the disease, the pressure on GPs not to send these children to hospital will be overwhelming.

In the second place, hospitals may have to open wards specifically for whooping cough, imposing an enormous task upon nursing staff. In my experience the problems of bathing, feeding, and attending to 18 infants in one ward can only be met by sufficient additional staff, which is just not available in the NHS today.

In the third place, it is not the young children of 2 or 3 years who will necessarily suffer dramatically. To most of them whooping cough is an unfortunate temporary illness from which they will recover. Their admission to hospital, however, imposes unnecessary hardship on the mother, who divides her responsibilities between home and hospital or neglects one for the other. To leave the infected child at home, however, imposes too great a danger on the younger infants in the family, especially the newborn child. Moreover, with the decline in immunisation the concomitant decline in "herd" immunity may reach a critical level. Beyond this, rapid transmission of disease throughout the community will cause the morbidity and mortality among those infants who are below immunisa-

tion age that immunisation was largely created to prevent.

Any investigations into the dangers of whooping-cough immunisation must be repeated or reassessed and compared sensibly with the dangers of not immunising the community. If the reader still believes that immunisation is too dangerous to be continued, then I encourage him to visit the City Hospital and see the effects for himself.

ROGER D STRACHAN

Edinburgh

SIR,—It is sad that pertussis has again become a widespread and debilitating illness after almost being eradicated and that this present epidemic is affecting not only children but also many adults, some very seriously and some for the second time, myself included.

Further, how many of the troublesome and persistent coughs of the past months among adults could have been second attacks also for those who, like me, had their first before immunisation was practised? Having worked in a four-man practice and all of us having started immunising against pertussis from the very beginning of this campaign, I can categorically state that I have never seen a case of brain damage even possibly caused by pertussis vaccine, and having spoken to many doctors have yet to find one who has had such a case.

One wonders if those of our colleagues who have spread so much fear and uncertainty among young parents regarding vaccination against pertussis with these stories of brain damage have had any experience of a bad pertussis epidemic and the distress and danger it can bring. Perhaps this epidemic will be a