

# BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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**The dark future for child health**

SIR.—In the past five years the Government has dealt a series of blows to child health for the present and future. In succession the Court Report,<sup>1</sup> the Black Report,<sup>2</sup> and now the Short Report<sup>3</sup> (discussed in a recent leading article: 20-27 December, p 1662) have been consigned to the scrap heap. When one looks back over the broad field of preventive paediatrics it is apparent that the children's division of the DHSS has been somewhat less than forceful or that the Department's hierarchy has been uninterested in arguing the case for investment in child health.

Following the misguided vaccine damage campaign, the initial DHSS equivocation towards immunisation programmes contributed materially to the loss of confidence in immunisation by many doctors and health

visitors. The weak DHSS guidance given to the regional health authorities on the subject of screening for congenital hypothyroidism has been a further sign of the low priority for prevention of handicap in childhood.

The attitude of the DHSS has played a major part in undermining confidence in the future of the community child health services. The forthcoming reorganisation of the NHS will be a further nail in the coffin of preventive medicine in childhood. The disappearance of the specialist in community medicine (child health) and the proposals by some regions (allegedly with DHSS prompting) to divide urban communities into small district health authorities (or their stated disinclination to amalgamate districts into larger DHAs) will also serve to undermine the community child

health services. Integration of hospital paediatrics and community paediatrics will be adversely affected.

There has been a noticeable absence of vigorous response by the British Paediatric Association (in the absence of a corporate royal body concerned with paediatrics) on these issues. The Children's Committee of the DHSS has not been heard to speak with any authority on many of these pressing subjects. Who inside or outside the DHSS feeds the Secretary of State with the utterances that have been so dismissive of evidence provided by many respected figures in the profession?

The *Panorama* programme on brain death brought out the full panoply of the medical establishment to voice concern over the