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NEWS

IMMUNIZATIONS SAVE 8,00,000 LIVES YEARLY OF INFANTS IN DEVELOPING WORLD

Immunizations against six childhood diseases are now saving the lives of an estimated 8,00,000 infants yearly in countries of the developing world, according to data available to the World Health Organisation at the end of July.

A status report published in WHO's *Weekly Epidemiological Record* (No. 34) says this represents a "major public health gain in the past ten years."

WHO launched an Expanded Programme on Immunization in 1974 against polio, diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough) and tetanus, as well as measles and tuberculosis, the major killers of infants.

According to WHO officials, the success of the programme is measured largely by immunisations given against polio as well as against diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus (DPT).

To protect against these diseases, a full course of vaccines—either two or three doses—is needed, and thus more than one trip to the health centre. The report shows 40 million infants receiving these doses, a figure that represents coverage of about 40% of the 100 million infants who, in 1984, survived to one year of age in the Third World.

Despite these success, however, an estimated 2,65,000 cases of polio, two million deaths from measles and 6,00,000 deaths from pertussis alone still occur yearly in the developed world. These figures exclude China.

And only 14 million pregnant women receive the two doses of anti-tetanus vaccine they need. As a result, some 8,00,000 deaths from neonatal tetanus occur each year, according to WHO estimates. In order to protect their newborn babies against neonatal tetanus, the doses are given to mothers four weeks apart. (Press Release WHO/22, 22 August 1985, World Health Organisation, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland).

A RED LIGHT ON CANCER

. . . A patient with cancer of the eyelid was unable to have surgery. So "James McCaughan [Grant Medical Ctr., Columbus, Ohio] gave the patient an intravenous injection of hematoporphyrin derivative, a dye made from hemoglobin, the red pigment of the blood that, for reasons that scientists don't understand, lingers longer in cancer cells than in normal ones. After waiting 72 hours to allow the dye to clear out of healthy tissue, the surgeon shone a visible red light on the tumor for eight minutes; two months later, because a little of the cancer was still there, he repeated the treatment. That was in 1983. There has been no evidence of the tumor since. . . . 'The dye sets the tumor cells up for the kill by making them sensitive to light,' explains Thomas J. Dougherty [Roswell Park Memorial Inst., Buffalo, N.Y.]. 'When the light hits them, the dye absorbs it, and the energy from the reaction results in the release of singlet oxygen, a form of oxygen that—although it lasts for only about a millionth of a second—has a lethal effect.' No one is sure why singlet oxygen is lethal. 'But we think it's because it destroys cell membranes.' "

[(Judith Randal in *Science 85* 6(5):76–7, Jun 85). Reproduced with permission from Press Digest, *Current Contents*®, No. 30, July 29, 1985. p. 14. (Published by the Institute for Scientific Information®, Philadelphia, PA, USA.)]