

# POLIO EPIDEMIC

Recently, over 260 children have been paralysed and more than 28 children have died as a result of poliomyelitis (polio). The epidemic began in May this year, and like many other preventable diseases, has hit mainly rural "homeland" areas. Gazankulu, Venda and Lebowa have been most seriously affected by the disease, but patients have been reported in other parts of the Transvaal as well.

Polio is a relatively rare but highly contagious disease, which is spread by contact with those who are already infected with the virus. The initial symptoms of polio are often mistaken for a type of flu complicated by fever and diarrhoea. In most cases the disease is confined to the throat and intestines. However, in one in every 100 to 1000 cases, the virus attacks the spinal cord leading to paralysis, and if left untreated can prove fatal.

Last year there were very few cases of polio reported, and workers at State Health reported that polio appeared to be under control. The subsequent outbreak of this new epidemic came as something of a shock to the state authorities.

According to the state, the causes of the epidemic are the spread of polio from neighbouring states, failure of parents to immunize their children, ignorance, superstition and "disbelief of white medicine". As in the case of the cholera epidemic, the state has chosen to blame the victims for a disease they could never prevent.

The level of polio in a community is related to environmental factors and the effectiveness of immunization. Therefore inhabitants of areas with poor sanitation and water supply are far more susceptible to viral gastrointestinal infections such as polio. The disease can be easily prevented if people are effectively immunized with just three doses of the polio vaccine. It is essential that health services ensure that preventive health programmes are readily available.

The state reacted to the polio epidemic by restricting publication of information about it. In some cases immunization campaigns have been totally inefficient. Although the first cases of polio were reported in mid-May, immunization at Letaba Hospital only really started four weeks later.

The actual immunization programmes have been hampered by lack of personnel, vehicles and, despite claims to the contrary by the state, the scarcity of the vaccine itself.



Furthermore, most of the available vaccine was given to school children, and by the time attention was devoted to the group most at risk (those under 5 years of age) there was little vaccine remaining. At the same time that the radio was telling mothers to bring their children for immunization, the clinics were already out of stock of the vaccine.

The failure of the vaccination campaigns was due to a number of misconceptions. Many rural blacks were suspicious of the vaccine and distrusted the health services. Usually health services cost money, so what was it that the state was giving out for free? Some people suspected that it might contain poison. Furthermore the radio had said that it was mainly Shangaans who had contracted the disease. People from other ethnic groups felt that it would therefore not affect them and did not want to be vaccinated.

Although polio vaccine is available from clinics around the country, many people were not aware of the need for or the importance of vaccination against polio. In addition, clinics in rural areas are so sparsely distributed and transport facilities so poor as to make it extremely difficult to utilize even those minimal services provided.

Effective immunization can eliminate the chances of getting polio. It has been found, however, that about 20 per cent of those currently suffering from the disease had previously been immunized. The reason for this is that the vaccine was not properly handled. It has to be kept at below freezing temperature until just before it is administered. Careless storage, handling and packaging can break this "cold chain" and make the vaccine ineffective. Dr Pretorius, the superintendent at Letaba blames the South African Railways for failing to notify the health authorities when the vaccine is brought up to Tzaneen, resulting in the vaccine being kept under incorrect conditions and becoming ineffective.

The outbreak of yet another epidemic disease in the rural "homeland" areas is of great concern. Tuberculosis, typhoid, cholera, and numerous other preventable health problems have recently flared up. In the same period the state has cut expenditure on health and has frozen the level of health personnel. The real reasons for the spread of these epidemics can be traced not only to the atrocious living conditions in rural South Africa but furthermore to state neglect of health services in those areas.