

**Measles used to be considered a normal and generally manageable disease of childhood. So why are parents being scared into immunising their children against it? NICOLA LEGAT discovers that health officials aren't telling parents everything they need to know.**

"SHOULD NEW ZEALANDERS, especially parents, feel fear of the epidemic... currently sweeping the country, that feeling should, by all rights, pale to insignificance beside the shame they should also be suffering from. No excuse — and least of all sheer apathy — can justify the fact that the disease was allowed to become an epidemic, even less that it should needlessly claim the lives of several children... the loss of those lives should now be on the conscience of the whole country."

Thus thundered a leader writer in the *Northern Advocate* earlier this year, not about the bubonic plague, black death or poliomyelitis, but measles.

The Health Department could not have hoped for a more stentorian ally (despite its inaccuracy: three young children — not several — died of measles-related causes) in its battle to arrest what it termed an epidemic of measles which began in Wellington in early July and was, officials claimed, continuing into September with 4500 cases officially notified.

However, this figure substantially underestimates the situation as measles is not a notifiable disease. The official figures collated by the Centre for Disease Control in Porirua are based on voluntary reports by general practitioners and so do not include cases not notified, for whatever reason by doctors, or children who are cared for at home without referral to a doctor.

A school survey at the height of the outbreaks in August by Dr Lester Calder, deputy medical officer of health for the Auckland Area Health Board's central district, showed that the actual number of cases was between five and 10 times the reported figure. Using this as a guide, health officials estimate that between five and 10,000 Auckland children have had measles this last winter.

THIS IS WHAT the Department of Health brochure *Your Child And MMR* says about measles: "Measles is very easily passed from one child to another. It can make your child very sick. Measles shows up as a spotty red rash, high fever, runny nose, cough and sore, watery eyes. This can last for about a week. Measles can have serious complications such as chest or ear infections, or brain damage. Some children die of these complications."

Further on, the brochure advises parents and caregivers that they should also talk to their doctor, Plunket or public health nurse about the disease and the injection before their child is immunised, but for most parents those ominous initial words will continue to reverberate: "Some children die of these complications."

Death by measles was a prominent and constant element in the media coverage of the epidemic during July, August and September, although in general the press handled this aspect responsibly.

The major lapse came, predictably, from the *Star*. Under the headline "Jab Rush Over Killer Measles", reporter Lynley Bilby wrote, "Auckland parents are rushing to get children vaccinated against measles as the epidemic creeps nearer. Emergency vaccine is due to arrive in the city within the next 24 hours as doctors prepare to combat the spread of the virus that has already claimed the life of a Wellington child."

Health Department officials say they did not intend to scare people either about measles or into immunising their children, and that they deplore the use of such emotive language by the media.

However, there's no doubt that the *Star* tack definitely

# measles

## on elm street

