

What you should know about immunisation



'I wish I'd had the chance to get him vaccinated'

THE killer disease, meningococcal meningitis, has claimed 20 lives over the past two and a-half years. A further 211 people have contracted it in that time. Spread by respiratory droplets, its rapid onset (sometimes within hours) is the most insidious feature of this type of meningitis.

"We do not understand why we've had this epidemic at this time and in this place," says Auckland medical officer of health, Dr John McLeod. The disease has struck mainly in certain areas of Auckland, but the Health Department is carefully watching other parts of the North Island.

Which is the lesser evil? That is the question the community has to decide in the vaccination debate: mass immunisation with a minimal risk of adverse reaction of varying degrees or the risk of contracting crippling and killer diseases during epidemics.

The controversy which flared in late July when thousands of children were being vaccinated by the Health Department against Type A meningococcal meningitis centred on the number who experienced disconcerting neurological reactions later. It brought the whole question of vaccination under public scrutiny.

Should parents agree to vaccinate their children and can they trust vaccines and the word of vaccine manufacturers and our health authorities?

Katherine Findlay, Claire Parker and Jane Westaway have been looking at some of the pros and cons.

In May the department began a massive vaccination campaign in Auckland. Side-effects experienced by many children after vaccination caused concern to many parents and delayed the department's booster campaign by several weeks.

Dianne Thompson of Drury (South Auckland) is still a concerned parent. Her daughter Giarna (13) vomited and complained of numbness and a headache which she said felt 'like racing cars' driving through her head. Alarmed, Dianne phoned the South Auckland Health Department and was told Giarna's and the reaction of 40 other children at her school was hysteria. Angered by this dismissive response Dianne got in touch with her local newspaper. After a published story her telephone rang hot with calls from worried parents all over Auckland. In a quick u-turn, the Health Department checked out 600 of the 60,000 children who had received the vaccine. It reassured on the safety of the US-manufactured vaccine and announced that none of the side-effects was permanent or serious. It did advise that children under two who had experienced any adverse reaction should not receive a booster shot.

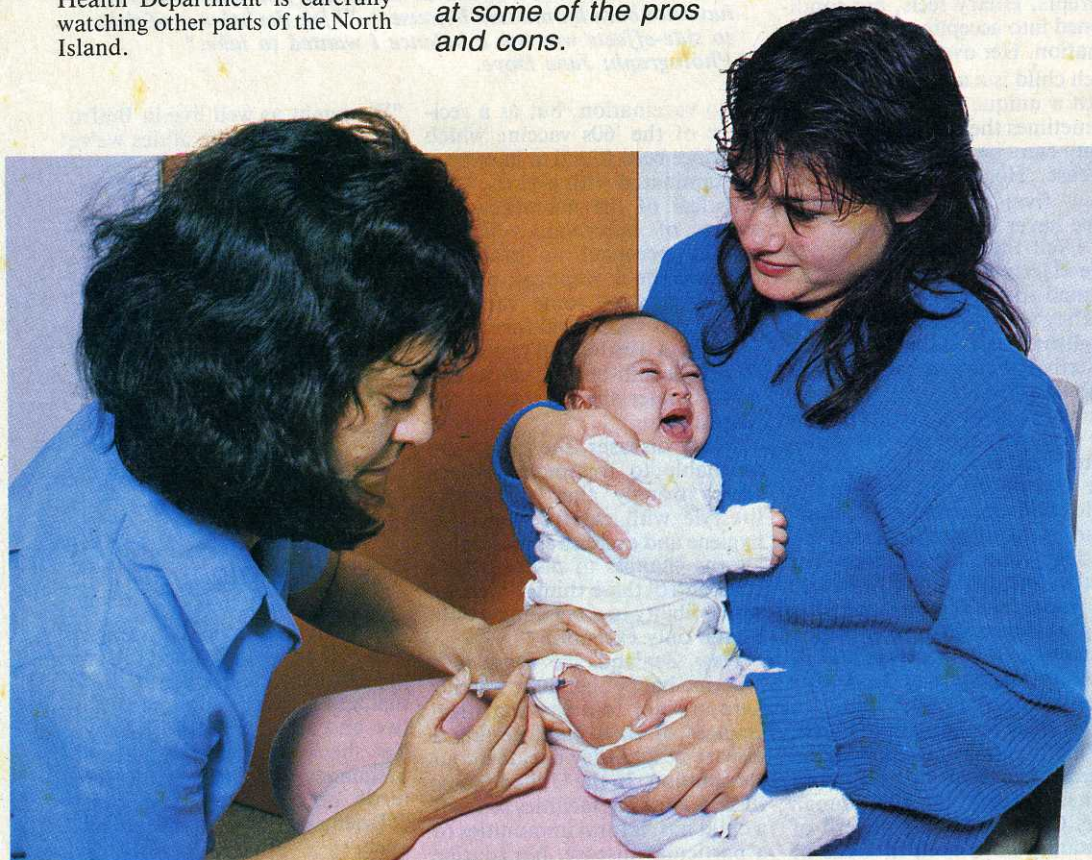
Dianne Thompson is still uneasy.

"I'm not sure that what happened to Giarna is acceptable. What about future years?"

"There's no way we're in the business of doing something harmful," says Dr McLeod. His 10-year-old son had the vaccine — and no side-effects.

"But I'd rather my son had a fever and felt unwell for 24 hours if it was to save some other child's life."

Sharon Dunn (to protect their privacy this family's real name is not used) would agree. She gets very angry when she hears people complaining about side-effects from the meningitis vaccine. We talk in her spotless Auckland home. She shows a family photograph of four healthy-looking, smiling children. "That's



TEARS as the needle goes in to give immunity against meningococcal meningitis. Three-month-old Riki gets his shots from Plunket nurse Charlotte Waetford while mother, Debbie, looks on. Photograph: Michael Willison.

