

To Conquer, or Control? Disease Strategy Debated

By **DONALD G. McNEIL Jr and
CELIA W. DUGGER**

There is a heroic allure to ridding the planet of a horrible disease forever.

Louis Pasteur is famous as the inventor of the vaccine. Jonas Salk is synonymous with the one he created to combat polio. In the medical community, doctors like Donald A. Henderson and William Foege are honored as the conquerors of smallpox.

Though the dream of eradication continues to animate scientists, doctors and public health officials, the history is at best rocky. In the past century, eradication efforts failed against hookworm, yellow fever and malaria. Today the struggling drive against polio has raised new questions about whether eradication

Other Likely Candidates for Eradication cont

DISEASE	EST. CASES	TRANSMISSION	BREAKING THE CYCLE
e hepatitis	350 million carriers	A virus in blood or body fluids can cause fatal liver disease.	Three vaccine doses.
Leishmaniasis	2.8 million infected; 1-2 million disabled	Bacteria transmitted by extended contact causes nerve damage and loss of fingers and toes.	Antibiotic triple therapy daily for a year. Symptoms can take 20 years to appear.
Neonatal tetanus	200,000 deaths per year	The umbilical cord is cut with a dirty blade. 95 percent death rate.	Clean delivery practices; vaccines for babies and mothers.
Iodine deficiency	740 million+	Goiters in adults, brain damage in fetuses.	Iodized salt.

eradication, noted that if smallpox had not been wiped out a year before the dawn of AIDS, it might well be impossible now, given that the smallpox vaccine was dangerous for people with compromised immune systems, like those with H.I.V.

“Now we know that there are many people we can’t vaccinate for smallpox,” he said. “It’s very possible we couldn’t wipe out the disease. Think of what would have happened if we hadn’t eliminated smallpox in that window of opportunity—a window we didn’t even know about.”

Others agree. “As soon as polio is done and polio must succeed. I think measles will be taken up,” said Dr. Donald R. Hopkins, of the Atlanta-based Carter Center, who heads the International Task Force for Disease Eradication. “But many, like Dr. Henderson, who helped vanquish

smallpox, remain doubtful and believe the obstacles to eradication are far greater than advocates admit. The “siren song of eradication,” he says, has led public health authorities to declare goals he considers more “evangelical” than attainable.

“After the struggle with polio, people will think very hard before taking on another disease,” said Dr. Julian Lob-Levyt, executive secretary of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, a group that includes countries, international organizations and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He says that, despite scientific advances, the increased mobility of people and chaos in places like Sudan and Somalia, where no one can be sure of the status of any disease, make eradication harder today.

“We’re not talking about eradication the way we used to,” he said.

THE CARTER CENTER



One Copenhill
453 Freedom Parkway
Atlanta, GA 30307
(404) 420-5100
Fax (404) 420-5145
www.cartercenter.org