

## **EXPERTS CHECK FOR SIGNS OF INCREASE IN MENINGITIS B**

**The Daily Telegraph, By Celia Hall, Medical Editor**

PUBLIC health experts are watching to see if the potentially deadly meningitis B disease "takes over" from meningitis C that the national vaccine program is eradicating. There are no signs so far that the C strain of the bacteria is reorganizing itself into the B strain, said Dr Liz Miller, head of the immunization division at the Public Health Laboratory Service. Yesterday The Telegraph reported a great fall in meningitis C cases after a £20 million vaccine campaign started in November 1999.

Prof Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, said: "This is a wonderful achievement and has dealt a hammer blow to meningitis C, an extremely serious illness. I urge any parent of children under 18 not yet vaccinated to take advantage of the safe and effective protection the vaccine offers and make an appointment to see their GP. There is no need for any to go unprotected."

Figures released by the Department of Health show that cases of the disease had fallen by 90 per cent among 15 to 17-year-olds in England and Wales and by 82 per cent in babies under a year old, from 32 in 1999 to six in 2000. Overall, the incidence of the disease among under-18s, the population that has been vaccinated, has fallen by 75 per cent, with experts estimating that 500 cases and 50 deaths have been prevented.

Dr David Salisbury, the Government's head of immunization, said: "We are seeing the disappearance of a disease. I believe the vaccine has been shown to be highly effective and completely safe. Any risks associated with the vaccine are nothing compared to the risks associated with the disease."

Sixteen people have died after being vaccinated, but none of the deaths was related to vaccination. In future, only babies of two, three and four months will be routinely vaccinated, as all others should already be protected.

Doctors are warning parents to remain vigilant as cases of the more common meningitis B are increasing. Through the Nineties, B and C strains rose to a record of 3,000 cases in 1999. Last year's total is expected to have been lower.

Julia Warren, of the Meningitis Research Foundation, said there was little hope in the near future of a vaccine for meningitis B, which the immune system finds difficult to detect. Further research published today, babies who contract meningitis are twice as likely as their peers to suffer behavioral problems as teenagers.

Those who survive the virus when under a year old are eight times more likely to be expelled from school and have double the rate of behavioral problems in adolescence. The study also found that six per cent needed special tuition, compared to one per cent of others.

Experts described the preliminary findings of the research as "worrying" and called for young meningitis survivors to be given long-term follow-up checks and special care. The study of more than 1,000 children who developed meningitis before their first birthday between 1985 and 1987 was done at Hammersmith Hospital, west London, with a grant from the charity Action Research.