

DA Henderson
27th National Immunization Conference
Centers for Disease Control
Bethesda MD
15 Jun 1993

DA HENDERSON REMARKS
27TH NATIONAL IMMUNIZATION CONFERENCE
JUNE 15, 1993

It is a special pleasure for me to be here with you today and, more important, to formally join all of you as a committed member of the immunization team. So many of you here have already devoted years of dedicated work to the immunization program, albeit with too few resources and too little commitment by national leaders. We promise change. This program now is one of the highest priorities of the President and of the Secretary and of the Congress. Substantial additional resources are promised. With such commitment and resources, I am convinced we will meet and indeed surpass the challenges posed today by Secretary Shalala.

As you know, immunization is, by far, the single most cost effective and the simplest of all medical procedures. There is no excuse for any child experiencing a single day of illness due to any one of the vaccine preventable illnesses. And yet, over recent years, as immunization works its magic, we became increasingly complacent. We forgot the havoc and the toll that these diseases can exact; and we failed to give immunization the priority it must have. This we will change.

Throughout my medical school years, we were called upon every summer to provide special care to a seemingly endless number of

patients in respirators. Polio, particularly with bulbar paralysis, was a truly frightening disease and more than once we wondered if we, the caregivers, might not contract the infection ourselves from the patients we cared for--and indeed, some did and some died. And then in 1955, just as I joined CDC, the Salk vaccine was first made available for use. There was no need to launch special programs to encourage either parents or physicians to participate. The problem for us then was that of obtaining enough vaccine--and for a long period, it had to be rationed. However, the memories of the pre-vaccine period and the patients remain with me as a vivid memory as though it were yesterday.

Fortunately--but in some ways regrettably--few physicians and nurses today have had that sort of personal experience with polio or with many of the other vaccine preventable diseases. They sense and behave as though these once-feared infections were a part of this country's history--perhaps a problem for poor tropical countries but not to the U.S. They forget that these diseases are every bit as lethal today with all the potential they ever had to spread and to infect--unless we maintain our vigilance and high levels of protection through vaccination.

Since my baptism of fire in the early polio vaccine years, I've had an exceptional series of opportunities to participate in the development of vaccines and in the implementation of immunization programs both in this and in other countries. The impact of the

programs has been startling, however measured. Smallpox, for example, which killed more than 2 million persons a year and infected five times that number was brought to "0" in just over 10 years. Then, we launched a global immunization program which today is preventing more than 3 million deaths as vaccination levels throughout the third world have increased from less than 5% to now nearly 80%. And polio eradication, once deemed impossible, appears now to have been achieved throughout the western hemisphere.

As you know, after the introduction of polio vaccine, other vaccines were perfected--measles, mumps, rubella, hemophilus and hepatitis B. Others are on the way. The concept of a childhood without serious infectious diseases is not a dream. It's a foreseeable reality. But to benefit from these vaccines, we must have an effective functioning immunization program. Some would argue, in fact, that it is the most important pillar of our entire child health system.

Can we do it? In every country where I have worked--however primitive, however difficult--it has always been possible when there was a clear political commitment. Now, the President and the Secretary have clearly and unequivocally stated and have demonstrated a level of commitment which we have never before had. It now becomes the responsibility of all of us and health care providers in particular wherever they may be, to accord

immunization the high priority it deserves. After all, if our health system cannot provide to all of its children the most cost effective and the simplest medical procedures available, what does it imply about the rest of the system?

We need to accept as a societal norm that a single case of a vaccine preventable infection is wholly unacceptable. Each such case represents, in some manner, a failure of the system. Thus, each must promptly be investigated to determine if the child had been vaccinated and, if not, why not. From this, patterns will emerge--perhaps of improperly stored, sub-potent vaccine, perhaps of systems which pose unusual or unforeseen barriers to immunization, perhaps complacent health care providers who have not given vaccination the needed priority.

We need to introduce new methods to continually monitor success in achieving immunization coverage and where it is inadequate, to take action to change the delivery system. In my experience in all manner of countries, 80% immunization coverage is readily achieved and 90% attainable by virtually all well-conducted programs. To achieve these results, we will need to act creatively to devise systems which are accessible to parents and children--systems which are truly "user friendly." We will need to join with other agencies and with the rapidly growing number of concerned and committed volunteer and community organizations to develop and institutionalize the system and the

commitment to vaccination.

Can we succeed? I've now met with many of those concerned with immunization, both within and outside of government; I've had an opportunity to review many of the program plans you have developed; and I have discussed program needs.

I am convinced that the budget proposed by the President to Congress provides the needed resources; I am impressed by the enthusiasm and determination voiced by everyone; I truly believe that if we can work effectively together--and I pledge to you my best efforts--we will achieve within three years the goals of virtual elimination of the present vaccine-preventable diseases and a system which will assure continuing coverage with existing and future vaccines of 90% of our children by the age of 2 years.