

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE STOPPED VACCINATING?

"It sounds like your messages contradict each other. On the one hand you're telling us that thanks to vaccines these diseases are almost gone from the United States. But on the other hand you're warning us to immunize our children against them."

It's true, some of the diseases we discuss in this booklet are becoming very rare in the United States. Of course they are becoming rare largely because we have been vaccinating against them. But it is still reasonable to ask whether it's really worthwhile to *keep* vaccinating.

It is like bailing out a boat with a slow leak. When we started bailing, the boat was filled with water. But we have been bailing fast and hard, and now it is almost dry. We could say, "Good. The boat is dry now, so we can throw away the bucket and relax." But the leak hasn't stopped. Before long we'd notice a little water seeping in, and soon it might be back up to the same level as when we started.

Unless we can "stop the leak" (eliminate the disease) it is important to keep immunizing. Even if there are only a few cases of disease today, if we take away the protection given by vaccination, more and more people will get infected and spread disease to others, and soon we will have undone the progress we made over the years.

In 1974 Japan had a successful pertussis (whooping cough) vaccination program, with nearly 80% of their children vaccinated. There were only 393 cases of pertussis that year in the entire country, and no deaths. But then rumors began to spread that pertussis vaccination was no longer needed and that the vaccine was not safe, and by 1976 only 10% of infants were getting vaccinated. In 1979 Japan suffered a major pertussis epidemic, with more than 13,000 cases of whooping cough and 41 deaths. In 1981 the government began vaccinating with acellular pertussis vaccine, and the number of pertussis cases dropped again.

So what would happen if we stopped vaccinating here? Before long we would see epidemics of diseases that are nearly under control today. More children would get sick and more would die.

We don't vaccinate just to protect our children. We also vaccinate to protect our grandchildren and *their* grandchildren. With one disease — smallpox — we "stopped the leak" in the boat by eradicating the disease. Our children don't have to get smallpox shots any more because the disease no longer exists. If we keep vaccinating now, parents in the future might be able to look back at the "old days" when we had diseases like polio and measles for which children had to get vaccinated.