

EDITORIAL

THE TYPHOID MENACE

When the incidence of a disease like typhoid is seen to double with each passing year, the natural response is consternation and, in the local context of social and economic development, shocked bewilderment. But the hard data presented in the article by Dr. Cvjetanovic in this issue of the S.M.J. cannot be challenged or denied. The incidence rate has rocketed from 7.04 per 100,000 in 1973, to 13.56 in 1974 and to 22.8 in 1975. These are grim statistics, and they demand explanations.

Basically, an increase in the recorded incidence of a disease is due to either a real increase in disease incidence itself or greater thoroughness in case-finding. With improved sanitation facilities and an adequate system of safe water supply, the opportunity for spread of the disease is clearly curtailed, and the actual number of cases should, if anything, diminish. The important clue to the question lies perhaps in the establishment, in 1973, of the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Environment. The intensification of surveillance and case-searching that follow have indeed unmasked significant numbers of mild cases and carriers which would otherwise have been missed. Carriers in particular can only be ferreted out by thorough and painstaking field enquiries backed by an efficient bacteriological service. The increase in the number of recorded cases is not only thus explained, but also testifies to the effectiveness of the surveillance system.

The question as to why there exist such large numbers of cases, clinical and subclinical, remains to be answered. Typhoid is still endemic in Singa-

pore. The articles by Dr. Cvjetanovic and Drs. Koh and Goh (in this issue) contain findings which are of immense value in the attempt to rid our country of this scourge. The single most important point of attack would appear to be the public food-handlers. Any of the latter who harbour the responsible salmonellae can, through neglect of basic rules of hygiene, touch off outbreaks. The first priority would logically consist in identifying and treating carriers among the food-handlers, while vaccination should help to diminish the pool of carriers in their midst. Of special interest also is the finding of "high-risk foods and beverages" such as cold dishes and iced-drinks which involve much handling during preparation. This singles out the group of food-handlers who must receive the strictest of scrutiny.

The importance of educating the public on the practice of personal and food hygiene cannot be over-emphasized. However, though a fundamental requirement, public education involves abandoning old undesirable habits which proverbially die hard. To be effective this requires sustained intense campaigns. The ultimate result should be highly rewarding as it would also mean effective control of other infective diseases, especially those in which the pathogens invade via the gastrointestinal tract.

With the help of the epidemiological information so far gathered, our serious efforts at eradication of the disease should stand a good chance of success. When this has been achieved, we have still to remain vigilant over the problem of imported cases and imported infected food to which our country is especially exposed.
