The new plans outlined by Dr Dixon gave substantial credit to the IAESR’s development of team research and effective dissemination of its findings and supported the continuation of these traditions. These are, however, means toward an end that is still unclear for the social research field. In the past, teamwork in social research entailed a commitment to the social disciplines, in particular sociology and social work. This dimension of teamwork is apparently not to continue. Effective dissemination has meaning only where there is an audience who see utility in research findings for the policy process, not only as policy makers but as welfare workers, lobbyists, and citizens. It may be that social research in the institute will continue to find such an audience, but there is nothing in the present agenda to signal such a possibility.

Shelia Shaver
Claire Thomas

HEALTH

Keeping mum about dengue

In NSW recently there was a notified case of typhoid and four diarrhoea sufferers were hospitalised in Port Kembla. All this made the national news and, not surprisingly, for typhoid is potentially lethal and an “imported” disease. Yet at the same time the media neglected an almost parallel case in North Queensland, where a definite case of dengue fever has recently been notified along with a number of suspected cases.

Amazingly, almost no-one south of Mackay has heard of the disease. Dengue has four strains. The first three may involve muscular and joint pains, headache, and fever and be mildly discomforting for some weeks. Even the “mild” forms have been known to last for up to eight weeks and to extend to chronic fever and pains, with depression as an after-effect. The fourth strain, known as dengue haemorrhagic fever, is another matter altogether. With it, the patient begins to haemorrhage from the internal organs, shock routinely follows and, it is believed, in 50 per cent of cases the sufferer dies. It is particularly hard to handle in young children, as Asian and Pacific Island communities have found to their grief.

North Queensland is just coming to the end of a typical wet season and authorities fear an outbreak similar to or worse than that of 1981-82, when there were 2,000 reported cases of dengue with many hospitalisations (and no doubt a high number of unreported cases). Health officials in Townsville have consistently denied that any haemorrhagic cases have occurred, although there was a scare in Cairns in 1982-83 when four “possibles” were admitted to hospital for surveillance. Current medical thinking is that haemorrhagic cases result mainly from previous sufferers being reinfected with a second strain. This makes a second epidemic particularly worrying.

So far, there is no treatment for dengue and no sign of a search for one. The disease is known to be spread by a carrier mosquito, Aedes Aegypti, a small freshwater breeding mosquito that attacks mostly at sundown, preferring to bite the lower limbs. It is a subtle and quiet insect and almost impossible to detect and swat in its adult form. The larvae breed in containers of fresh water: rainwater tanks, swimming pools, old tyres, pot-plant trays, tin cans. In the wet season, and especially towards its close when ground water is no longer being washed through by new falls, the insect is at its most vicious. In the recently diagnosed Townsville case, local health authorities found that 24 properties within the 400-metre Aedes flying range of the man’s home contained Aedes Aegypti larvae.

Policing the disease is almost impossible. In an urban and semi-urban environment like Townsville it is proving difficult to educate the public to empty potential breeding containers. There is almost a resentment that officials can deny one’s right to own, say, a bird bath, no matter how potentially lethal to neighbours. In the absence of fines, hardly anyone takes any notice.

Several campaigns have been run — to little avail. Then the 1982-83 campaign dubbed Aedes Aegypti the “Aussie Mosgie” — making light of its dangers and making it seem almost unnecessary to exterminate it. Children were signed up as “Mosgie Rangers”. Quite what they were expected to do is uncertain. This year posters, buttons and stickers have been issued showing a mosquito in the cross-wires of a telescopic sight. The slogan reads: “We’re pulling our weight to keep the North great”. The local radio stations continue the theme by running an anti-dengue commercial based on the hit song Staying Alive. Federal money is being used under the Community Employment Program to employ a group of “surveyors” who search out breeding grounds — to the irritation of the residents.

The really peculiar thing about dengue, however, is its absence from the news media outside the north. As Townsville and Cairns vie, in almost equal cargo-cultish way, for international air traffic, tourism and the moated casino, as heavy industry moves out and the economic necessity of tourism increases, no-one is going to make a big deal in the south about dengue. It is already distressing enough for tourists to discover that between October and May there is no swimming because of the lethal box jellyfish. Add to that the increased risk of skin cancer, rumours of the destruction of the Barrier Reef by the crown-of-thorns starfish, and the general lack of tourist amenities in Townsville, and it seems economically disastrous to put out more bad news. Any future epidemics will have to be contained both medically and in the media if the commercial interests have their way.

A.W. McHoul

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