

Are vaccines safe? — mother

Independent immunization researcher Hilary Butler of Tuakau wants more information about the meningococcal meningitis vaccine made available to parents.

Mrs Butler says parents are not told enough to make an informed decision about whether to have their children vaccinated.

A mother of two preschoolers herself, Mrs Butler has spent five years researching the use of vaccines and says a growing number of doctors and parents are questioning whether vaccines are safe and effective.

She says the meningococcal meningitis bacteria was present in one in four people during autumn, winter and spring.

"There has been an unusually high incidence of the disease over the past two years, but there has also been an increased level of overcrowding, poverty, malnutrition and sub-standard hygiene — especially in South Auckland."

Mrs Butler says the vaccines were first introduced in Finland in the early 1970s. Since then some medical research had shown some children immunized against one strain of the disease had caught other which were more harmful.

Finland had since introduced a vaccine giving immunity against several strains of the disease.

Mrs Butler says parents should make sure the vaccination is carried out "in as safe manner

In the last two years, several parents had been awarded Accident Compensation for vaccine-damaged children. She says many of those parents had regretted not following certain guidelines such as not having their child vaccinated under the age of nine months. Any earlier she feels it is difficult to know whether a vaccine reaction is co-incidental or not.

The child should be fit and be checked by a doctor before having the vaccination, she adds.

"Any reaction should be noted on a piece of paper signed by the health nurse or doctor and such information as the vaccine, manufacturer, lot and batch number and time and date of admission should also be recorded."

Effective and safe - doctor

The Health Department's immunization campaign against meningococcal meningitis was intended to stop a killer disease in its tracks.

That's the comment of Auckland Regional Medical Officer for Health, Dr John McLeod, replying to Mrs Butler's concerns.

There are always risks and dangers with any vaccine and these have to be weighed up wisely," he says. "In this case we took the advice of an independent body — the Communicable Diseases Advisory Committee — which unanimously recommended the campaign be carried out in the area concerned.

"We have to cover a certain percentage of the population to stop this disease in its tracks — to stop it in the area where it is focused. We don't know where it is going to break out next.

"We're not denying

there are other factors, such as overcrowding, involved, but if we don't do something about it now we are likely to have another 100 cases this winter — and this disease is blinding and maiming people."

Dr McLeod points out that the vaccine used is approved in America," which is a watchdog in the marketing of drugs and vaccines.

"We can never give an absolute guarantee that no one will come to any harm from any procedure but this vaccine has been proved to be safe and effective. It is a killed virus made without active proteins and would be unlikely to produce any dangerous reactions.

"It does have a slight side effect, in a small percentage of cases, resulting in a fever lasting 12-24 hours and local irritation at the site of the injection," he says.

Dr McLeod also pointed

out that the Health Department had done its utmost to make information available by giving hotline numbers and professional people available to talk to concerned parents.

"Unfortunately not everyone has had the benefit of such a good education as Mrs Butler has had and few of those people who are most affected by this disease have contacted us for further information.

"The people who are most at risk are not in a position to be concerned about the fine details of unusual risks of this vaccine — they are concerned with survival.

"We just cannot pour out pages and pages of information for the public — it is time and cost prohibitive. But if people want more information we are available to give it.

"For many people this campaign is literally a matter of life and death."