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/THE FIRST WORD

Right of Reply

A

few weeks ago, a local health-maintenance organization finished up a two-month-long campaign to immunize pre-school children in the New York City area. Paid announcements on local radio stations promised that any child (whether covered by the HMO or not) under the age of three would receive—free—vaccinations. Public health authorities did provide much of the vaccine, it's true, but the HMO provided the rest. . . along with the consumables and the skills.

The HMO's managers reasoned that even a modest increase in the immunized preschool population would improve herd immunity, reduce the spread of infectious disease, and save the program money in the long run. Interesting. The initial ads shocked us, though. They promised immunization to all comers against polio, diphtheria, whooping cough, measles, mumps, rubella, and hepatitis B. The radio spots also promised vaccination against "HIB"—meaning, of course, *Haemophilus influenzae* B. Radio being what it is (and our hearing not being what it was), we misheard this last as a promise of *HIV* vaccination. A spokesman quickly set us straight.

This small misunderstanding did get us thinking again about what impact a real human immunodeficiency virus vaccine is likely to have. . . specifically, on the collection of epidemiological data on AIDS. For the definition of the syndrome has evolved a certain circularity. From a constellation of clinical presentations—many of them uncommon—the definition has expanded to include any single presentation—some as common as invasive cervical cancer or pulmonary tuberculosis—accompanied by a positive HIV titer.

What will happen to the statistics when widespread vaccination leaves large numbers of uninfected people HIV positive? Will we adopt relatively expensive direct-virus detection tests, or will we fall back on a clinical definition? And will that change in definition generate artifacts?

Which brings us to this month's Last Word, a column by Peter Duesberg, who avers, among other aversions, that the protean definition of AIDS has already produced statistical artifacts that mask the syndrome's true nature.

Duesberg's name has become a magnet for controversy, and we enter the fray reluctantly. Like Tevye, we find ourselves unhappy about almost every aspect of this affair. On the one hand, we think that Duesberg is wrong in his conclusions; on the other hand, we have found his individual points and questions thought-provoking. On the one hand, Duesberg's habits of presentation can be hectoring and intemperate, in the fashion of the dinner guest who harangues the other diners, robbing both the conversation and the meal of their savor and making enemies of his fellows even more by the manner than the matter of his discourse; on the other hand, those among Duesberg's targets to whom we have spoken have been quick to question his sanity, his manner, and his motives, but very slow to answer his science. On the one hand, even after a decade of intensive research, AIDS pathogenesis is still obscure; on the other hand, Duesberg has devoted great energy to criticizing the results of others and almost none to designing and performing the experiments that would clarify the questions he himself raises. On the one hand, we found our colleague's "Has Duesberg a right of reply?" (Nature 363:109, May 13, 1993) not ultimately persuasive, and we find it difficult to agree to silencing a scientist; on the other hand, we do fervently hope that the discussion can be confined to data and analysis.

Science, of course, is a human pursuit—it is passionate, personal, and political as well as intellectual. Like it or not, people mark territories as their own and defend them as tenaciously as any mammal. This particular discussion has long since passed over into the political—to both sides, scoring points seems to be more important than gaining understanding. Marshalling support seems more urgent than marshalling data. Somehow, everyone concerned seems convinced that there are more important things at stake here than mere inquiry—that somehow in matters of particular urgency the truth becomes not an objective reality but a matter of public opinion.

—DOUGLAS K. MCCORMICK