

Science for Peace initiative

so no vaccine would be necessary at all," says Steven Hadler, chief of the agency's epidemiology and surveillance unit. "In the meantime, the sequential schedule will prevent most of the cases of vaccine-associated polio in the United States." Similar schedules have been adopted by 11 other countries, including France, Denmark, Norway and most of Canada.

It is not fully understood why about three or four of the children who receive the vaccine every year develop polio. Some believe that the weakened virus reverts to its more dangerous form to cause disease. An additional three or four cases occur in individuals who have contact with vaccine recipients, and the remainder develop in people with compromised immune systems. The new schedule will likely be less effective in preventing disease among them.

Opponents of the change have argued that many parents will resist the idea of their children having to receive additional injections in an already crowded schedule of shots, and that it will mean more doctors' visits as many paediatricians will not give multiple injections on the same day.

Ultimately, this could result in fewer immunizations and more cases of polio, they say. "The decision is a serious mistake, and we are very concerned about the impact it could have on public health in the US and globally," said Peter Paradiso, senior director for scientific affairs at Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories of St Davids, Pennsylvania, in a written statement. Wyeth-Ayerst manufactures the oral vaccine. Also, there is concern that some children might be more susceptible to polio should the wild-type virus ever reappear here.

In 1994, the World Health Organization declared that polio had been eradicated from the Western Hemisphere. The last documented case occurred in Peru in 1991. In the United States, the last case of naturally occurring wild-type polio occurred in 1979. Nevertheless, about 120,000 cases still occur annually in other parts of the world.

David J. Williams, president of Connaught Laboratories of Swiftwater, Pennsylvania, a unit of the French drug-maker Pasteur Mérieux and manufacturers of the injectable vaccine and a version of the oral vaccine, said the panel's decision "marks the beginning of the last chapter in eradicating polio from the United States.

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Daniel Cohen, French geneticist and director of the Centre d'Etude du Polymorphisme Humain (CEPH) disclosed in late October details of his plan to build a network of advanced research centres or 'technopoles' in the Middle East and South Mediterranean countries. The new centres will fall under the auspices of the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and will be supervised by 'Science for Peace' — a foundation to be established by Cohen specifically for this initiative. The aim is to construct a series of centres for biological and genetic research that will draw on expertise from the region and that will tackle specific problems of the area. The hope that scientific cooperation between nations will contribute to peace and stability in the region.

The first of the proposed centres would be situated somewhere on the Jordan River, between Jericho and the Dead Sea. Spread out over 3 km and with a proposed staff of 1,000 researchers, with Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinians equally represented, the centre would focus on research to develop drought-resistant crops. The budget is slated to be FF3 billion (US\$600 million) over a 10- to 13-year period. A second facility is planned for Hammamet, Tunisia, and will focus on malaria research. Although smaller in scale, with 250 employees when fully staffed, the centre is expected to have an annual budget of \$20 million. Negotiations are said to be under way in Egypt and Morocco as well.

Cohen has already received political support for the project, the most vocal coming from countries that stand to benefit the most. Several dignitaries were present at the press conference to announce the initiative, including Leila Shahid, the Palestinian ambassador to France, Dina Cortes, representing Prince Hassan of Jordan, and Yehuda Lancry, the Israeli ambassador to France. Shimon Perez, Israeli interim first minister, is also said to be interested, according to Baruch Raz, scientific advisor at the Israeli Embassy in Paris.

As laudable a programme as Science for Peace appears, some observers have expressed doubts about the advisability of building high-tech centres in countries that are struggling to meet their existing funding needs for education, health and agriculture, and whose scientific facilities are basic at best. Few of the universities in the South Mediterranean countries, for example, operate strong science teaching programmes, and the level of research is not very advanced. "The idea is interesting, but I'm not convinced that building technopoles is a priority as far as developing research in these countries is concerned," says Albert Sasson, himself a Moroccan and assistant director-general at UNESCO in Paris. Sasson believes that a better way to go would be to reinforce existing structures such as universities and agricultural research centres.

Attempts to reach Cohen for a response failed, but it seems that the proposed research centre in Jordan could profit from its proximity to the scientific community in nearby Israel, one of the most scientifically developed countries in the region.

Where the money to pay for such an initiative will come from is not clear. Cohen is counting heavily on a gala fund-raising concert to be held in Paris in mid-November to shore up support and to attract donors. At press

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Daniel Cohen (left) and Leila Shahid announce the 'Science for Peace' initiative.

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time, no funding had been secured to construct and operate the first few centres. In a statement, Cohen said that funding will be sought from a variety of sources, including allocations from the development budgets of countries within Europe, and from the European Commission through MEDA, its programme for development of the Mediterranean region. MEDA has \$6 billion to distribute over the next four years, but probably only a tiny portion will be earmarked for scientific development. European and Mediterranean ministers of foreign affairs will meet in Barcelona at the end of November to refine policy, although the selection of projects for future support is expected to take several more months. Cohen may be counting heavily on MEDA for support, but funding is by no means 'in the bag'.

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