

# Tetanus: why not immunize housewives and the elderly?

VIRGINIA ALUN JONES, BA, MB, B.CH

House Physician, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge

**W**HO are the people who need to be immunized against tetanus? The popular image is that it is only sports people and workers in horticulture, agriculture and building who need to be particularly careful. In a project carried out during my medical student attachment to a practice in Ely, I found that this was not so.

The national average incidence of tetanus is only about 1 in 3 million (DHSS, 1970-1976), but the partners in my teaching practice estimate the local incidence at about 1 in 25,000. If the national average figures disguise a low rate in the populous conurbations and a high rate in the country, the incidence in Ely may well be relevant to most of rural Britain. The Chief Medical Officer does not clarify this point (DHSS, 1970-1976).

I questioned 200 people about their state of protection against tetanus (lockjaw). Half the sample were interviewed in the surgery, the other half in the street or cattle market. Forty-seven per cent said they were fully protected, a further 23 per cent believed they had some measure of protection and 29 per cent knew they had none. I checked these figures against the practice records, and made the optimistic assumptions that anyone who had done National Service would have been immunized (Cotter and Wilson, 1975), and that everyone aged 18 or under would have been included in the child immunization scheme (*Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin*, 1975). I found that people were tolerably accurate: verbally 70 per cent claimed full or partial protection—on paper it appeared more like 60 per cent. I was not able to check the antitetanus antibody levels of the interviewees, but extrapolation of National Blood Transfusion Service figures (Barr *et al.*, 1975; Eldridge and Entwistle, 1975; Eldridge, personal communication, 1980), suggested that 40 per cent of local blood donors are fully protected. Of course, they cannot be regarded as representative of the general population.

The people who were most unlikely to be protected were the retired (the age group identified as at risk by Cotter and Wilson, 1975) and housewives (identified by Blake, 1971). Seventy per cent of those doing outdoor

jobs claimed full protection, as against 48 per cent of those in indoor jobs and 34 per cent of retired people and housewives. Among the adults interviewed, 51 per cent of the men claimed full protection, but only 34 per cent of women, an effect which was most marked above the age of 60. People living outside the town claimed to be slightly better protected than the town-dwellers (50 and 44 per cent).

The study supported the findings of earlier workers (Cotter and Wilson, 1975) that information displayed in waiting rooms does not make people have immunizations: of the 100 people asked in the health centre, 96 had noticed the posters but only 47 of these claimed full protection. Amazingly, less than half those aware of the recent local cases of tetanus were fully immunized.

So why not encourage the mature town-dwelling ladies of your rural practice to come with, and set a brave example to, their grandchildren? It is well worth their while to have even the initial and six-week injections (Bainton *et al.*, 1979).

## References

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## Address for reprints

Virginia Alun Jones, Department of Medical Gastroenterology, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Hills Road, Cambridge.