

JPRS: 4431

6 March 1961

MAIN FILE

CONTROL OF INFECTIOUS HEPATITIS

- East Germany -

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DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 2

19990305 059

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FOREWORD

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CSO: 1495-S

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[Following is the translation of an article by H. Hudemann in Volksstimme (Voice of the People), No 14, Magdeburg, 12 January 1961, p. 5.]

During the last four years medical statistics in the Magdeburg district have shown a decrease for most diseases, but not for infectious hepatitis. This disease has shown a continuous increase, and, since 1959, it stands first on the list in number of cases. But it is not only for this reason that it demands our attention. To be sure, jaundice rarely causes a dangerous condition of sickness, but it may seriously impair the health and the work capability of many patients for a period of months or even years.

The disease is contagious and gets its name from the yellow coloring of the skin, which appears first in the eyes and can be seen in natural light. The yellow coloring is hardly noticeable, however, under artificial light. The coloring itself is caused by the passage of bile into the blood stream, which happens when the liver cells have been severely damaged by the disease germs.

There are other causes for jaundice, such as inflammation of the gall bladder or gall stones. But these, of course, are not contagious. Usually before the appearance of the yellow coloring, there is a period of indisposition. For one to three weeks the patient feels tired, has a sensation of pressure in his upper abdomen, nausea, indigestion and fever. During this time the germs are spread throughout the body, attacking mainly the liver cells. As soon as the damage to the cells is great enough, jaundice occurs. At this time the disease is easily diagnosed.

Once infectious hepatitis is recognized, it is best to place the patient as soon as possible in the hospital. There he will receive the best methods of treatment, a correct diet, and also the necessary isolation can there be carried out in an effective manner.

The disease lasts, according to the severity of its attack, for a few weeks or months. But for a long time afterwards, the patient must maintain a strict diet. He cannot eat all foods, and he must avoid fats and alcohol. If the patient does not heed carefully these rules of dieting, a relapse may occur, just as it might through too strenuous physical activity.

Such relapses have as their consequence the danger of causing permanent damage to the liver. This may create difficulties for the patient throughout his life and can lead to a complete incapacity for work. On the average, about a sixth of all patients with the disease suffer permanent damage done to the liver. In regard to the large total number of patients, this danger warrants our special attention.

The disease occurs over the whole world. In Central Europe the number of cases begins to increase in the fall, reaches a peak during the winter, and later begins to decrease.

About the disease germs themselves we know very little. Until now, no one has found for them either a suitable form of culture or a suitable animal for testing purposes. They can multiply only in living cells. They are smaller than all forms of bacteria and are not visible under ordinary microscopes. They apparently belong to the virus family. During a patient's illness and also during his incubating period of abnormal indisposition, the contagious elements are passed out in the patient's bowel movements and are carried over by uncleanness on his part to the surroundings. This happens much more easily, of course, when the patient's personal relationships are very close.

Most cases of contagion occur through food, drinking water, and perhaps through contact with other objects or things. It is especially dangerous to fertilize vegetable gardens with human excrement. Vegetables from such gardens are very dangerous for raw consumption, and moreover, very unappetizing. Not only that, they present a danger of infection to the housewife who prepares them.

It should also be expressly pointed out here that fruit which has passed through the many hands of marketing should be eaten only after it has been carefully washed. Epidemics are also caused by drinking water which has been contaminated by human excrement carried into the water mains by river or sewage water during breaks in the lines.

Naturally, such accidents do not happen very often, and only through the coincidence of several unhappy occurrences. By the regular addition of chlorine to the water supply the greatest danger is eliminated.

However, the whole run-off area for drinking water must be protected against every possibility of contamination. It is for this reason and in their own interests that the inhabitants should pay strict attention to the directions posted on signs in these areas.

Under close living conditions, in camps, and also naturally in a patient's surroundings, every neglect of rules of hygiene may lead to a large outbreak of the disease and may cause an epidemic. This is especially true of personal cleanliness and food preparation.

Therefore, during war and post-war periods, the number of cases of infectious hepatitis in army troops has the habit of increasing greatly. But the spread of the disease is also favored by close individual contact between people who live in nursing homes, kindergartens, and similar establishments. The large number of cases which occur in such places clearly shows the contagious power of the disease.

As a method of prevention and for suitable cases, it is possible to give shots of gamma-globulin to people who have to be around infected patients. Such an injection, made from defensive organisms in the human blood, can, if given in time, ward off the disease. It should be given as soon as possible after any disease contact, and at least eight days before the appearance of any disease symptoms [sic]. This protection is good only for a few weeks and is not effective in all cases.

Unfortunately, an inoculation which would give an enduring immunity for years has not yet been developed. Therefore, we only have common preventive measures at our disposal, which derive from the way in which the disease germs are spread. These measures are not only important for patients, but especially for people who come in contact with them, and also for all the inhabitants of a city or a community in which infectious hepatitis occurs.

Besides personal cleanliness, including a thorough washing of the hands before each meal and after each use of the toilet, it is necessary to maintain rigorously all instructions for food hygiene and drinking water supplies. This has to be done to stop the constant increase in number of cases.

It is very important to protect both ourselves and our fellow citizens from this, in no way harmless, disease.