

# LEUKAEMIA

HERE and there amongst us, a family is caused bitter sorrow by a disease called leukaemia. Some acute forms of this disease hit children, that's why it's so upsetting. The family have to stand by helpless for no cure is known. Then, after one of their bright hopes has been taken away, they are left wondering if some of their remaining children will also contract this disease. The purpose of dealing with this cancer—for that's what leukaemia is — is to reassure families that have been stricken that, as far as is known, there's no part played by heredity in this disease. Therefore, there's no reason to expect a second case in any one family. It would be frightfully bad luck if such a thing did happen.

The bone marrow has a big say in forming blood elements. Leukaemia is a cancerous growth in the bone marrow, somewhere in the body. Sometimes, but by no means always, there's a story of a bone injury or disease before leukaemia begins! It can be in either acute or chronic form. Unfortunately, the acute forms favour children. Some chronic forms happen from mid-life on. The acute forms of leukaemia cause fever, bleedings and increasing anaemia. Abnormal white cells are circulating in the

This is the text of a talk on health broadcast recently from ZB, YA and YZ stations of the NZBS by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Deputy-Director-General of Health

blood. It starts quite suddenly, like any other fever. Very soon the abnormal white cells spoil the balance in the blood vessels and the body can no longer carry on.

There are several chronic forms of this disease, in some of which the spleen and lymphatic glands are involved and enlarged, as well as the bone marrow. Diagnosis of all forms, acute and chronic, is made by examining microscopically either blood films, or material from bone marrow punctures. Patients have lived with this disease for a decade or more, but usually the time limit is but a short one after diagnosis, and modern medicine tries to make this period more comfortable.

Can this be done? Considerable progress has been made in treating children with acute leukaemia. Before 1947 a child who contracted it lived less than one year. There's still no cure. However, a new drug, aminopterin, in about half the cases will get rid of the troublesome symptoms for worthwhile periods of



time. For example, at the Children's Medical Centre at Boston, such treatment of almost 400 children with acute leukaemia prolonged life in about two-thirds of the young patients, sometimes for more than two years after onset, and in one case for more than four years.

Cortisone and ACTH have been tried, and there are reports for and against beneficial results. Nitrogen mustard has been of benefit in treating some of the leukaemias. New agents in the purines and pyrimidines are being tried out in a New York Cancer Centre. X-rays, deep therapy, is used to mitigate one type of chronic leukaemia, and a drug, myleran, helps this type also. The search is defin-

itely on for a drug to beat, not just to ameliorate this killer.

This search is going on in the wider field of all cancers. There are ups and downs, discoveries and barren periods. Some hormones can be used to restrain certain cancer growths. Radio-active iodine has proved valuable against thyroid cancers. The discovery that nitrogen mustard could be used to benefit some leukaemias came out of war. Mustard gas used in wartime reduced the white blood cells circulating in the blood vessels. So the idea was born of trying it in leukaemia where there's an overplus of these cells. The idea was sound, and patients have an easier time. Surgery, and radiation from x-rays and radium, are still the sheet anchor of cancer cures. But the little restricted victories from hormones radioactive iodine, and some chemicals, all contribute to the general advance.

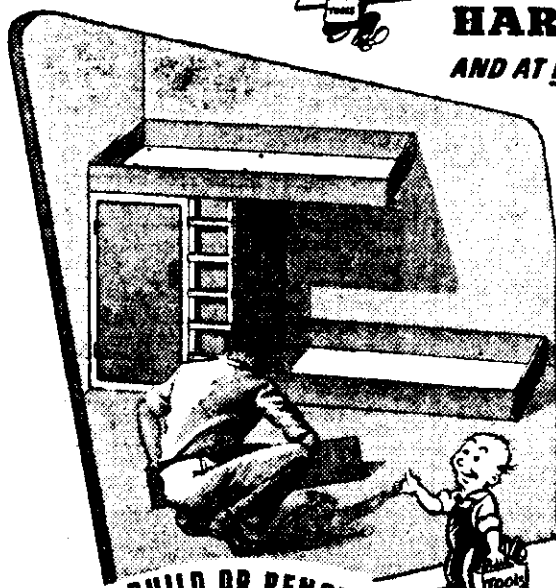
Advance, you say? An enquiry in U.S.A., published in 1954, established that, at least in that land, modern procedures have apparently increased the rate of cure of cancer from roughly 15 per cent. to approximately 50 per cent. This follows from people knowing more about cancer and reporting earlier when there are suspicious symptoms. It seems that, in the overall cancer picture, it pays to see your doctor if you have any of the danger signals.

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