

World Health Day

Mother on the Watch

By Claire Isbister*

IN THESE fast changing times with technology and science sweeping us into the future more quickly than we can adapt ourselves to it, and Womens' Liberation urging drastic changes in woman's role, every mother must try to stand back and take a cool dispassionate look at what it means to be a mother and what her responsibilities are.

To appreciate the place of the mother in the family, the words of Sir John Spence, author of the famous *One Thousand Families Survey* published some 20 years ago, are well worth recalling: "In the study of these families and in attempting to correlate their environments with the health of the children, there emerged one dominating factor—the capacity of the mother. If she failed, her children suffered. If she coped with life skillfully and pluckily, she was a safeguard to their health. In spite of lapses and failures, the mother stands out as the cornerstone of the family structure, and our experience confirms that in all sections of the community she remains the chief guardian of child welfare."

Thus the mother is seen as the custodian of the child's health—health in the sense of WHO's definition as complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The responsibility of the mother and the family to promote this state of well-being becomes obvious when it is realized that health is dependent on three major factors: heredity, environment—from the time of conception—and the ability of those caring for the child to manipulate the environment to meet his needs.

The family provides both the heredity and environment, the mother being responsible for half the heredity and, in the intra-uterine period, the total environment. As the main controller of the environment for at least five years after birth the mother has paramount responsibility for the child's well-being.

In his book *Attachment*, Bowlby discusses how man and other animals have needed the social group for their evolution and survival. The family, which is the basic unit of the social group in man, provides the protected environment in which the needs of the young can be met and the dangers to their health and well-being minimized. In it they learn to survive and reproduce themselves, and acquire habits and ways of coping with their environment. Bowlby points out that in all groups the mother-child relationship is a constant one. In the case of humans, the more the species has developed, the more compact has the father-mother-child family become and the mother-child relationship grown closer. The family has to provide protection, security and support for a very long period until the human child can take his place in a complex technological world.

The last 50 years have seen great changes in the

family structure and the role of woman. Changes such as the education of women, their inclusion in the general work force, the instability of modern marriage and the stresses within and upon the family, all underline the need for both parents to understand the needs of the children and their responsibility towards them.

HAZARDS

What are the main hazards that a child in today's world faces and what can a mother do about them?

Available statistics from various countries give an indication of the number of children who start life with a handicap. Approximately 5% have a congenital abnormality of some severity including defects of hearing and sight not detected at birth, about 5% are mentally retarded (IQ below 75) and about 2% more have some degree of spasticity. Many lives are lost in the perinatal period (the time immediately preceding the birth and the first week of life), the main causes of death being preterm or premature birth, abnormalities present at birth, and difficulties associated with birth and with establishing existence separate from the mother. Other important causes are infection, malnutrition and the mysterious 'cot death' (S.I.D.S.) usually occurring in the first three months. In the 1-4 year age group, the growing child's life is threatened by accidents, such as poisoning, falls, drowning, and motor vehicle accidents, violence as well as many infections, mainly respiratory. In the developing countries a combination of infection and malnutrition is the main cause of death and still exceeds accidents as a cause of death among children of school age.

REASONS FOR MEDICAL ATTENTION

Causes of death do not provide the only index of the incidence of illness or the main reason why a child may need a doctor's help. Ten years ago the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia, with the help of 70 general practitioners, did a survey to determine the main reasons for children being brought to the doctor. In the first year of life, it was found, the main reason was immunization or check-up. The main symptoms causing concern in this age group were coughs and colds, digestive upsets, and skin rashes. Classified under diagnoses they represented infections, allergies, and psychological and nervous disorders. In the 1-4 year age group respiratory symptoms were the main reason for the child being brought to the doctor, followed by immunization and accidents, particularly cuts and bruises. Then came nervous and emotional problems, and digestive symptoms. Many of the children with respiratory and digestive symptoms were found to have been allergic and often not recognized as such.

FEEDING THE CHILD

Inadequate nutrition can be a threat to the child's health in countries which have a shortage of food as well as those which have it in plenty. Nutrition is no longer the simple matter it used to be. Supermarkets with abundant food are no guarantee that the people will get the best or even adequate nutrition. The food shopper has to know what is healthy food and

(Contd. on page 133)

*Consultant Paediatrician, Royal North Shore Hospital, St. Leonards, N.S.W., Australia