

CHAPTER 6

Illness



A child with polio in Guy's Hospital after the war. After the war, once a cure had been found for TB, polio became the most feared disease in Britain. It tended to strike children out of the blue and often resulted in total or partial paralysis.

I contracted polio when I was five or six. In a long ward at Queen Mary's, Carshalton, strapped down in the bed with just one arm unaffected. The boy in the next bed looked like the Mekon from Dan Dare, except he wasn't green. He was the dark intellect of the ward.

Nothing has changed out of recognition since the 1930s more than health care and the way we treat illness and pay for it. The only free treatment then was that provided by clinics which dealt with simple children's ailments more common in those days, like boils. Many diseases were more-or-less untreatable. There were very few vaccines and no antibiotics for the civilian population until the end of World War II. The NHS vaccination regime has since stamped out so many dangerous childhood diseases that we have almost lost our collective memory of them. They included diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, measles, mumps, chicken pox and German measles (rubella). Any of them could kill you, especially if you were poor and undernourished. Tuberculosis, TB, was still untreatable and was a slow but sure death sentence in almost every case. The air in cities was polluted by smoke from coal fires, and there were many more children with respiratory problems in Britain than there are today.

It's worth summarising the vaccination regime now in place for the newborn child, to remind us what this generation has escaped.

At two months there are three vaccinations. The first is a five-in-one vaccine that protects against diphtheria, tetanus, polio, whooping cough, and 'hib', a dangerous bacterial infection once mistakenly considered a type of flu (and, incidentally, the first free-living organism to have its entire genome sequenced, in 1995). The second protects against pneumococcal infection, the third against rotavirus, a highly infectious stomach bug.

At three months babies are vaccinated against meningitis C and septicaemia.

Various booster doses for these are administered in the first year, then the MMR vaccine, a three-in-one against measles, mumps and rubella. It's this vaccine that in 1998 caused a scare that it could cause autism. This was later completely rebutted, but widespread reporting of the claim led to a sharp drop of MMR vaccinations in London, down to 63% at its worst. In consequence there was a major mumps epidemic in 2005, and in 2006 a big increase in cases of measles, which in 2008 was declared 'endemic', meaning that it was once more sustained within the population.

From the ages of two to six children get an annual flu jab.

At 12 or 13 girls are vaccinated against cervical cancer.

There are boosters throughout school years, then there's a pause until 65, when flu and pneumococcal jabs are available, and after age 70 there is now a vaccination against shingles. For at-risk groups vaccinations are available against hepatitis-B, TB, and chickenpox.

We'll start with the doctors. An insight on the time before the NHS is provided by this woman, born to a GP not long before the war began.

Father was a GP in Ealing, one of four brothers who all became doctors. Their father was a rabbi in Northern Ireland, their mother having died giving birth at last to a daughter. Father's patients were often very poor. I asked him once what the impact of the new NHS had been. He'd been both delighted and relieved that he would no longer have to ask for payment, and thrilled that everyone could get free medicine.