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Progress Against Hepatitis

The rising incidence of illness and death from serum hepatitis in recent years has been a cause of growing concern, especially as the disease is usually transmitted through blood transfusions or infected needles. The report yesterday by Dr. Saul Krugman of New York University that he and his colleagues have apparently demonstrated two means of immunizing patients against the disease is highly encouraging. Dr. Krugman was properly cautious in his announcement, but the possibility of an effective vaccine against serum hepatitis now appears brighter than ever before.

Particularly for those who need major surgery and the accompanying massive blood transfusions, a successful vaccine would have far-reaching consequences. Today the risk of serum hepatitis from infected blood is serious, notably in this country where many transfusions are made with commercially bought blood that carries a relatively high risk of hepatitis. There has been much discussion recently of the urgent need to stimulate voluntary blood donations which, experience in Britain and elsewhere has shown, entail minimum danger of transmitting hepatitis. An effective vaccine would be an even more complete solution to the problem.

As so often happens in medicine, Dr. Krugman's advance is in part a result of serendipity during basic research carried on without any intimation that it would have results applicable to hepatitis. Almost a decade ago a researcher in genetics, Dr. Baruch Blumberg of Philadelphia's Institute for Cancer Research, found a strange particle in the blood of Australian aborigines, a particle he named Australia antigen. Subsequently Dr. Blumberg and Dr. Alfred M. Prince of the New York Blood Center found Australia antigen to be linked with both infectious and serum hepatitis. Their discoveries induced a research explosion which has greatly increased knowledge of both types of hepatitis and which is likely to provide an effective safeguard against these ailments.

It was appropriate for Dr. Krugman to use his lecture yesterday announcing his group's findings as an occasion for warning against crippling cuts in Federal Government funds for medical and biological research.