Rubella vaccine ready

Pekin duck embryos are used to grow live-virus vaccine for German measles.

If the cycle that began in 1920 prevails, German measles viruses will be around the United States in droves by late 1970 or early 1971. The last time it struck in epidemic proportions, in 1964, the virus killed or deformed the children of 50,000 women who were infected during the first three months of pregnancy.

If it strikes again in 1970 as predicted, scientists will be ready. Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Robert H. Finch last week approved the first vaccine against rubella, urging that it be used widely among school-age children who might otherwise transmit the disease to their mothers, but cautioning against its routine use in women of childbearing age because its safety in this group is questionable.

The license, expected since April (SN: 4/12, p. 355), was issued to Merck Sharpe & Dohme in West Point, Pa., following a two year study of the vaccine's safety and effectiveness by the Division of Biologics Standards of the National Institutes of Health. Tested in 18,000 children, the live virus vaccine induced virtually no side effects and is effective for at least three years. Children given the vaccine in initial pilot studies in 1966 still have antibodies to rubella viruses in their blood.

Research for a vaccine has been under way since 1962 when scientists at Harvard and at Walter Reed Army Hospital isolated the rubella virus. More than 650,000 doses of the vaccine, produced in a duck embryo cell culture system developed by Drs. Maurice Hilleman and Eugene Buynak, are immediately available. Merck plans to distribute two million doses by August.

Regulations governing the standards of another vaccine grown in a dog kidney cell culture also have been set. Although a final license has not been issued, the Philips Roxane Laboratories in Columbus, Ohio, is expected to receive one by fall.

$1.3 BILLION LATER

MOL shot down

The Defense Department's Manned Orbiting Laboratory has been fighting an uphill battle ever since Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara first proposed it late in 1963. Critics claimed that the military space station, designed to keep two-man crews in orbit for a month at a time, would largely duplicate the functions of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Apollo Applications Program, also designed for extended stays aloft. Others feared that the project might put the U.S. in an unpopularly militaristic position in space.

For those reasons, as well as the competition among projects for funds even within the Defense Department, last week the MOL was killed.

The various activities scheduled for the MOL would have included detailed surveillance and photography, as well as research in materials, biomedicine, remote sensing and other areas. It has often been assumed, however, that plans also included such controversial subjects as testing of weapons systems (even non-nuclear ones) and the inspection of foreign satellites.

Also the increasing sophistication of unmanned military satellites may well have made MOL obsolete.

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