

PUBLIC HEALTH

Fight Germ Diseases

► FUTURE OF THE NATION demands continuing with vigor the fight against communicable diseases, from polio to the common cold.

Concern for the health problems of the older persons in the population, even though their numbers are growing, must not overshadow the importance of communicable diseases. Otherwise, the next generation of older persons will lack vitality and stamina.

This, in essence, is the warning of Dr. Theodore J. Bauer of the Public Health Service's Communicable Disease Center, Atlanta, Ga., in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Aug. 20).

"The children and younger men and women must have a top priority in our health programs if we are to assure the vitality and stamina of our future adult populations," he states. They are the ones chiefly attacked by the communicable diseases, he points out.

One in every four deaths in the age group under 35 years is caused by a communicable disease. In the older group it is one in 12. In addition, communicable dis-

eases cause the majority of absences from school and work, and may lead to future disorders of heart, liver, kidneys and nervous system.

The virus diseases are "perhaps of greatest concern" right now, Dr. Bauer says. The problem of polio in the United States, for example, "cannot be accurately measured by the more than 36,000 cases reported in 1953 or by the 58,000 cases reported in a high epidemic year such as 1952," he states.

"This baffling disease is now distributed over the entire United States and its incidence has been increasing for more than a decade."

Pointing to its increase in many other parts of the world, Dr. Bauer says we may be seeing a "world-wide pandemic, the end of which is not yet in sight."

Viral hepatitis, better known to the layman as jaundice; psittacosis, or parrot fever; rabies; smallpox; yellow fever; the common cold, and insect-carried encephalitis of man and horses are other of the virus diseases Dr. Bauer says we must continue to fight.

Science News Letter, September 3, 1955

PHILOLOGY

List 2,000 Languages

► ABOUT 2,000 completely distinct languages are spoken in the world and nearly half of this number are native to North and South America, estimates Dr. J. Alden Mason, curator of the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. There are or were, more separate languages in California than in all Europe.

Relatively few have ever been put in writing.

There are no primitive languages, declares Dr. Mason, who is a specialist on American languages. The idea that "savages" speak in a series of grunts, and are unable to express many "civilized" concepts, is very wrong.

"Of course, the savage has no single word for 'atom' or 'isostasy,' but if he had to explain the concepts in his language he would have no difficulty in doing so.

"In fact, many of the languages of non-literate peoples are far more complex than modern European ones," Dr. Mason said. "English is one of the simplest languages in the world." Only Chinese is simpler.

Evolution in language, Dr. Mason has found, is just the opposite of biological evolution. Languages have evolved from the complex to the simple. In the case of Latin, for instance, its modern descendants, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, are grammatically simpler than the parent.

"Of course there must have been a time," he said, "when grammars were building up,

but that time was early in human history, maybe hundreds of thousands of years ago; of that period we know nothing."

Today primitive peoples may roughly represent the speech of Stone Age Man. Typically, their grammars are much more complex; they often have more genders, numbers, persons, tenses and modes, especially the latter, than any modern language.

Many American Indian languages are on the verge of extinction, spoken by only a dozen persons.

Little by little, the University Museum is building up a collection of recordings of the speech and songs in these little-known languages before they disappear completely. The project is described by Dr. Mason in the *University Museum Bulletin* (June).

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MEDICINE

Anti-TB Chemicals Cause More "Vanishing Lungs"

► "VANISHING LUNG" cases are becoming more common as a result of treatment of tuberculosis with streptomycin and, particularly, the newer anti-TB chemical, isoniazid, Dr. Israel Rappaport of New York charges in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Aug. 20).

"Vanishing lungs" are lungs in which there are thin-walled abnormal air spaces.

They look as if areas of lungs were actually vanishing. They have been known before chemicals for treating tuberculosis became available.

The chemicals cause the condition, Dr. Rappaport says, because they stop the tuberculosis before thick-walled cavities or dense fibrous tissue has time to form.

The abnormal air spaces, also called "cyst-like cavities," should be removed by operation whenever possible, Dr. Rappaport advises. They may, if left, be potential sources of flare-up of the tuberculosis in a large proportion of cases. In addition, they are potential sites, he thinks, for progressive air space disorders, such as emphysema.

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