July, 1955

REPORT TO PHYSICIANS: SALK VACCINE

Dear Doctor:

The enclosed bulletin of information for physicians on the Salk poliomyelitis vaccine, which is being sent to all practicing physicians in the U. S., continues our policy of endeavoring to keep physicians informed on the subject of poliomyelitis prevention. We hope you will keep this booklet for ready reference. This is our sixth mailing to the entire medical profession since April 1954. Doubtless you will recall having read our Report to Physicians issued in July 1954, in October 1954, in March 1955, and in June 1955. To the best of our knowledge no other voluntary health agency has ever made such an effort to tell doctors directly about the problems it was helping to solve.

I will not attempt to rehearse here the numerous articles and editorials on the Salk vaccine that have appeared in the professional literature. As an example of prompt publication, however, I may point out that the entire 113-page Francis report, evaluating the Salk vaccine, was in print as Part II of the May issue of the American Journal of Public Health within less than 30 days after the report was made public at a scientific convocation at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on April 12, 1955. Ten thousand reprints of this report were mailed to physicians. It should also be noted that 40,000 physicians had the scientific highlights of this report on the day it was issued through a closed-circuit television program which was viewed in 61 cities in the United States and three in Canada.

Never before in the introduction of any new therapeutic or prophylactic agent has the medical profession had such an opportunity to be directly and professionally informed about the subject as it has about the Salk vaccine. It is
regrettably true that scientific communication on the subject has been overwhelmed in a flood of newsprint. But the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis has not, and cannot be expected to have, any control over the nation’s press.

The sincere—and successful—effort of the National Foundation to follow its basic mandate of protecting children against paralytic poliomyelitis has been complicated by political considerations not of its making. In a recent speech in Omaha, Nebraska, Dr. Elmer Hess, President of the American Medical Association, pointed out that many politicians in Washington were “trying to get on the bandwagon and take credit for the Salk discovery.” He said: “If it were not for the meddling of the politicians, there would be none of the current trouble.”

The practical possibility today of preventing paralytic poliomyelitis, by the proper use of Salk vaccine, is the outcome of a program of research and professional education begun by the National Foundation in 1938. The medical profession, which has continuously cooperated in this effort, shares in this triumph. The Salk vaccine is not the end of the road in poliomyelitis research. This achievement, however, should be viewed as one of medicine’s own great contributions to human well-being.

At this writing there are several questions about the Salk vaccine which nobody can yet answer. No one can predict the outcome of the several bills on the subject now pending before Congress, or say how soon or how much vaccine will be available to physicians for use in their private practices. We can say, however, that the present vaccine is safe and effective; and that the information in the enclosed brochure will answer pertinent questions concerning its continuing clinical use.

Very truly yours,

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Medical Director