Editor’s comment

It is interesting to recall that 50 years ago the high incidence of ‘epidemic catarrhal jaundice’ in Wensleydale in Yorkshire enabled Dr William Pickles to establish convincingly that infective hepatitis was transmitted by person-to-person contact. Moreover a majority of the 250 patients whom he studied (out of a population of 5500) were children. Twenty years ago infective hepatitis was still common in British children, but it has become rare. In North America and in northern Europe most cases now occur in adults.

It is likely that the Danish findings would apply to most European countries including the UK. Notifications of infective jaundice have fallen to about 15% of what they were 10 years ago, and the decline has been most evident in schoolchildren. The changing pattern of infective jaundice is probably attributable to improved hygiene, and the better sanitation associated with modern housing and less overcrowding. This has resulted in the great fall in the incidence of hepatitis A which is usually spread by the faecal-oral route. The incidence of hepatitis B has remained much the same but is rare in children in the UK.

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Received 31 March 1981