



Hundreds of mothers and children wait patiently for vaccinations in a never-ending queue during the outbreak of smallpox in South Wales last year.

Chilling reminder of a killer epidemic

By TONY AUSTIN

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Medical books

And Mr. Guest—recent credits Jigsaw and The Day the Earth Caught Fire—has been following the South Wales outbreak. His film is based on Elleston Trevor's book Pillars of Midnight inspired by the Brighton smallpox outbreak of several years ago, but brought up to date by the experiences in Wales.

Mr. Guest, the director, also wrote the script, "I sat down surrounded by medical books," he told me. "I got a cuttings agency to go back through the files of Welsh newspapers to take clippings from which I gleaned the urgency and drama of the epidemic. I also talked to Brian J. Ford, who writes for the Western Mail."

Mr. Ford, the Cardiff scientist, spent an evening at Mr. Guest's London house, discussing the medical aspects of the smallpox epidemic.

Very unlikely

"Mr. Guest was anxious to know how it spread," says Mr. Ford. "Of course the answer is mostly through contact of skin and clothes during the short period before the person with smallpox becomes ill and develops a rash. And it remains 'alive' as long as it is damp.

"But being a virus it is not always possible to trace its arrival—as far as I am aware the cause of the second outbreak in South Wales last year is still a mystery—and South Wales being a closely knit community with the Welshman being gregarious and as

loquacious as the cockney it had a good chance of spreading.

"From a film producer's point of view it is an ideal epidemic to make a film about because all that the most sceptical scientist can say is 'It's very unlikely.' That's because a virus doesn't follow a recognised pattern and once a person has it the treatment is to deal with the symptoms as they occur and build up the resistance of the patient.

"It's up to you whether you live or die—there isn't a drug that will kill off smallpox."

Last year an ancient and deadly disease—Smallpox—hit South Wales and as a result 17 people died. Recently the author saw location filming of 80,000 Suspects which tells of the panic and anxiety caused by such an outbreak.