"My job is to kill off the doctor!" Algeria's outspoken Minister of Health, Dr Djamel-Eddine Houhou was certainly exaggerating, but this is how he summed up his country's spectacular reversal of health policy. "We have let ourselves be led astray by the old French system of health care, which we copied without seeing that it was inappropriate for Algeria," he explained.

After the country's independence in 1962, Algeria stepped up its constructions of hospitals and its purchases of medical equipment and drugs, and at the same time laid emphasis on university-level professional training for its physicians. Yet the country's 250 hospitals, 350 polyclinics, 1,000 dispensaries and 12,000 doctors trained in European or Algerian medical schools did not succeed in solving the public health problems of a society which—despite its revenue from petroleum—still suffered from under-development; nor did the two billion francs spent annually on health services have any greater success.

Infant mortality, though halved over the past 20 years, still stands at 80 per 1,000 live births, and one child in ten, a total of 86,000 per year, still dies before the age of five. One Algerian in two has no access to running water, and the water supply usually carries a high risk of diarrhoeal infection for babies. Vaccination coverage is low and, as recently as 1984, measles was still killing 10,000 children each year.

Forty per cent of pregnant women give birth at home without help from qualified personnel, and mothers have an average of 6.4 children each, with consequent grave risks for the health of both mother and child.

Dr Houhou commented: "The French population is an ageing one and has special needs as a result, whereas in our country 73 per cent of the population is aged under 30, so we must concentrate on maintaining good health rather than filling hospital beds."

He went on: "I know that a policy of prevention meets with a lot of resistance. Local authorities much prefer to inaugurate hospitals or schools rather than digging drains, and the people themselves prefer to look after their own illnesses rather than taking steps to maintain their health. The doctors themselves refuse to get out of crowded hospitals and have no wish to practice preventive medicine which none of them learnt at medical school."

So the Algerian government has given priority to tackling infant mortality, with particular emphasis on diarrhoea, infectious diseases and water pollution. It has also stepped up childhood vaccinations against the six diseases, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, polio, measles and tuberculosis.

Henceforth, Algeria's public health policies will be geared towards preventive medicine, delivered through the primary health care approach, and the country will be thus better equipped to attain the goal of Health for all. •