Each one of us is born, grows up, perhaps marries and has children, and dies as a single individual. Our health is a personal matter, and we do our best – each as an individual – to prevent our own ill-health.

But the health status of a village, a district, a city or the whole planet is a collective thing. It can only be assessed by bringing together all possible information about every individual in order to determine what patterns there may be in the distribution of disease – or indeed of good health in a given community.

This is the role of epidemiology – the study and the application of all those “facts of life” that bear on our well-being. In collating those facts and establishing the patterns that put lives at risk, or that cause certain diseases and encourage their spread, research which may seem remote and arcane is helping medical science to put together a global jigsaw of health.

A pregnant woman who smokes risks harming her baby as well as herself. Together with the social sciences, epidemiology can help to devise programmes to counter the epidemic of tobacco-related diseases.

Right: WHO is committed to the eradication of polio within the coming decade. The disease still lames thousands of youngsters in the Third World.
Above: Netting protects this baby in South-East Asia. But the feeding-bottle is all too often a source of diarrhoea and malnutrition.
Below: Data on road accidents collected from around the world reveal an enormous toll of death and disablement.