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When causes must come before cures

CHOLERA is the scourge of India. A disease associated with poverty and unhygienic living conditions. It is essentially a Third World disease, not comfortably associated with a country that boasts miracles of heart transplantation and ultra-modern, multimillion rand monoliths such as the Johannesburg Hospital.

That is why its outbreak in the Eastern Transvaal underlines the fact that this country's medicine tends to have, as Professor Michael Savage expressed it in his Inside Mail articles this week, a white, urban hospital-centred bias rather than a black, rural preventive bias.

It is no use blaming the proximity of Mozambique for the cholera outbreak when conditions in the crowded KaNgwanc homeland — where many blacks have been "relocated" — are conducive to its spread. Yet the correction of these conditions does not appear to be part of the Department of Health's "action programme" for the situation.

But then, as Prof Savage points out, South African medicine is deeply permeated by the structure of apartheid. And apartheid means the cutting off of the black major-

ity from the political decisions which shape medicine in this country. Medicine is white-dominated, concentrating on the diseases of the affluent and the diseases found in what Prof Savage aptly calls the "septic fringes of its large cities."

We welcomed the appointment, last December, of a wide-ranging commission of inquiry into health services. Since then we have heard nothing of the commission's investigations. Thirty-six years ago the Gluckman Commission recommended ways in which health services could be directed at promoting health rather than curing disease.

But there was a change of Government and ideological priorities favoured separation, not equality, of services. Now, for equality, read expensive duplication. The real need, to find and remove the ultimate causes of ill-health, is still overlooked.

So the problem of the imbalance in medical services remains, highlighted by the cholera outbreak and steeped in political and social policies which promote poverty, malnutrition, social breakdown, ignorance and indifference.