

Polio victims face increasing problems

THOUSANDS of polio victims around the world who survived post-war epidemics of the crippling illness are battling a cruel second phase of the disease most thought they had beaten.



Post-polio syndrome, identified only in the past few years, has produced a growing number of support groups for victims as well as specialists clinics.

Experts studying the syndrome agree it is not a recurrence of the polio virus, but an onset of fatigue, pain and muscle weakness caused by failing nerve cells which have been working overtime for 30 years or more to compensate for the damage done by the original infection.

Wiped out

Polio has been all but wiped out in industrialised nations since the advent of vaccines in 1955. Less than a dozen cases occur in the United States each year.

But it remains a killer and a crippler in less developed areas, with at least 300,000 cases of paralytic polio around the globe each year.

In the United States, as many as a third of the 300,000 polio victims who survived epidemics after World War Two are believed to be at risk from post-polio syndrome.

Neurologist Dr Marinos Dalakas said: "Patients with old

polio have nerve cells that were over-functioning for many years — they have been trying to compensate for lost cells. But after a number of years, these cells cannot maintain all of the functions of the muscle they used to."

That was a speculative theory in 1982 when doctors first began paying attention to the problem, he said, but "now we have the evidence to prove it. It is a process that continues for many years. The whole system is trying to remodel itself, but it cannot do any more remodelling."

Syndrome

He said the syndrome was not life-threatening but could incapacitate. Its effects were worst among people who had the disease most severely first time around.

He said there was no overall therapy for the syndrome, although doctors had experimented with certain drugs. They had also encouraged patients to use walking sticks or braces and had instructed them how to compensate for the problems.