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## I.

# THE PROMISE OF VACCINES

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Vaccines are widely recognized as one of the most cost-effective health-promoting interventions. Through their use in immunization programs, they hold enormous potential for controlling the incidence of infectious diseases and thus the costs of medical care. For most diseases, treatment, hospitalization, or coping with the effects of disability are more costly than vaccination programs. When worldwide eradication of a disease is feasible, as has been achieved for smallpox and could soon occur for poliomyelitis, the cost savings become even greater because immunization is no longer necessary after eradication.

Recently, the World Bank in its "World Development Report: 1993, Investing in Health," reaffirmed that immunization is first among the public health initiatives that governments around the world should use to save lives and avert disease and disability (World Bank, 1993). Yet the potential of vaccines to avert suffering and death remains underexploited both globally and domestically. Infectious diseases remain the leading cause of death worldwide (World Health Organization, 1992). In the United States, health care providers often do not assign appropriate priority to disease prevention and miss opportunities to vaccinate. On the other hand, many individuals fail to seek vaccination because the demand for preventive health services is traditionally not as strong as the desire for medical treatment. New or improved vaccines are needed against literally dozens of major diseases, and the biotechnology revolution has made many of these vaccines feasible. But the United States and most other countries remain essentially reliant on a very small number of vaccine companies for their present and future vaccine supply. For complex reasons the pace of vaccine innovation and improvement is slower than public health experts believe is desirable, and the benefits of new vaccines in developing countries are often delayed.

Notwithstanding these concerns, there are indeed many notable achievements in vaccine development and immunization, as outlined in sections VI and VII. However, there has existed for some time the belief that even more could be accomplished if ways could be found to bring greater cohesion to the individual activities of those participating in these efforts. The promise of vaccines, coupled with the challenges their development and use pose, motivated Congress to create the National Vaccine Program as a vehicle for coordination and intervention to meet public health needs. That legislation (P.L. 99-660) called for the development of a National Vaccine Plan that would be updated annually (see appendix 1).