

IF CASH can compensate, then the problems of children born severely disabled might be slightly lessened by the £3 million fund set up for them by the Government. From next week, parents can apply for grants for items such as holidays, transport costs or special equipment for their children where these are not already available.

The fund is another example of Sir Keith Joseph's compassionate interest in groups of disadvantaged people whose needs have been mostly overlooked and of his skill in securing funds for them. But for all his hard work and vigilance in helping such groups, nobody can be more aware than the Secretary for Social Services himself that the effort is patchy.

In fact, the £3 millions would not have been allocated if the thalidomide tragedy had not uncovered the plight of thousands of children born with congenital handicaps for whom not very much is done. And what about the thousands of disabled housewives, another major category for whom nothing either is done? Isn't it time for an overall strategy for the disabled?



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disabled child—disadvantaged adult?
JOHN CUNNINGHAM reports

Secure move

Peter Townsend, Professor of Sociology at Essex University, who is getting the campaign together, wants a co-ordinated approach to the problems of disability. First, there are several groups who will be ineligible for any claim on the initial £3 millions. Muscular dystrophy may not be noticed until a child begins to walk; severe mental handicap may remain undetected for several years also. Should there be no finan-

cial help for young victims of road accidents?

The other need is for a continuing level of care and financial provision throughout the life of a handicapped person. "The problems grow as the child grows," says Mr Peter Large of the Disablement Income Group. There is often an ongoing need for psychological counselling, disabled children need more education than others, though this is frequently not avail-

able; job opportunities are slight and because of this they are not likely to be contributing to any employment insurance fund, they face a life spent on Supplementary Benefit.

There should be a national disability income. Determining it is a thorny question, but Peter Townsend is enthusiastic about a recent shift internationally in the methods used. The idea now being used in some West European Countries is to award compensation for the degree of handicap and the consequences it has on a person's life rather than for straight loss of earning power. The Attendance Allowance is the first sign of the adoption of the system in this country.

Although crude it would be a major step, in levelling up the inequalities which the public's fickle compassion has allowed to develop between, say, those disabled by blindness and those with mental handicap, or housebound wives. Professor Townsend estimates that there are at present at least 400,000 disabled children; they will be disabled and disadvantaged adults—if they survive—unless the Government starts to think about a comprehensive policy for them.

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