

From Inoculation to Vaccination: The Social and Political Struggle Against Smallpox

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Between the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe was ravaged by one of the most devastating pandemics in history, smallpox. This disease claimed the lives of an estimated 25-30% of the population, particularly children. Amid this chaos, a common reflection regarding inoculation skepticism and resistance emerged during the smallpox pandemic: "Besides, I cannot apprehend how it conduces to the Preservation of Mankind, to force a dangerous Distemper upon them, which possibly may never happen unto them, and if it should, may probably be attended with very little, if any Inconvenience; and as before has been hinted, is no Security against future Contagion" (Sermon, pg. 21). During this time, society grappled with the moral implications of inoculation and vaccination. Efforts to undermine the requirement of vaccines were widely disseminated through various media and public gatherings. Moreover, government-mandated vaccinations further heightened tensions with conscientious objectors, prompting significant civil unrest. This conflict evolved into a prominent social movement, transitioning from inoculation in the 18th to vaccination in the 19th century. In this paper, I will argue that the smallpox pandemic triggered a crisis characterized by medical skepticism and government power struggles, all of which reinforced stigmas surrounding vaccination. This mindset emphasizes the dangers of complacency in public health efforts and highlights the complexities inherent in navigating the intersections of science, politics, and ethics during times of crisis.

The pamphlet, "Some Leading Arguments Against Compulsory Vaccination," provides valuable insights into compulsory vaccination's social and legal ramifications during the late 1800s. European society transitioned from the traditional homeopathic practice of inoculation to the allopathic practice of vaccination around 1800, and some governments enforced vaccination to immunize everyone against smallpox. Those against vaccination described themselves as conscientious objectors who refused to be vaccinated on the basis that it violated their beliefs and free will. Resistance to vaccination became a mass political movement between the 18th and 19th centuries before organized parties could form. As inoculation became obsolete, people believed that inoculators had financial motives in maintaining the old method. The significant stigma surrounding physicians and inoculators was perpetuated, creating distrust for practitioners and government by some in society. While the British government implemented various measures to contain smallpox, navigating the legality and morality of stringent constraints amidst widespread vaccination resistance remained a significant challenge.

Further efforts to debase physicians' work involved describing their practices as terrorism, using the backing of the state to service their medical agenda. Not only did people hold skepticism for physicians, but they also expressed their disapproval of the government. In this collaboration between physicians and the government, people were unhappy with their efforts to professionalize the practice, such as having certified physicians to administer inoculation. Furthermore, physicians faced criticism for using police force to enforce their universal vaccination policies. People saw physicians' practice as an abuse of power and believed they had the most powerful profession with politicians at their disposal. Populists eventually suggested the concept of self-determination for being vaccinated to quell the civil unrest within the vaccination movement. The opposition to compulsory vaccination laws as infringing on personal liberty is described as "The vaccination law stands alone in the amount of its departure from the principle of *laissez-faire*, in the extent of its interference with personal liberty and the boasted sanctity of each man's home" (Vaccination, pg. 4). With physicians' intentions behind vaccination being questioned, speculation was invited that they performed such procedures for personal gain to fund their station with fees for their business rather

than protecting their communities. In addition, others refused vaccination on moral grounds, believing it was useless or dangerous, stating they were "acting on the conscientious belief that the operation is useless or dangerous, they have refused to permit the vaccination of their children" (Vaccination, pg. 6). Amid this division, the Legislature struggled to determine the morally correct decision. Once the disease of smallpox was no longer an imminent issue, the anti-vaccination movement disappeared.

People held onto the practices of old medicine that were widely acceptable, accusing physicians of dismissing other professions, such as herbalists, hygienists, hydropathists, and homeopaths. The opposition to vaccination described the drive for unification based on public interest as a powerful force that motivated compelling acts of protest. People genuinely understood the reasoning behind anti-vaccination, as their inspiring efforts were based on the wellbeing of society. While many refused to be vaccinated for personal beliefs, people were fined or jailed. Actions of reporting through surveillance often lead to outcomes of splitting up families and sending people to jail. For instance, the legal consequences of vaccinating a child led to "The Chairman, having heard what the mother had to say, fined defendant 5s. and 8s. Costs: in default of sufficient distress, seven days' imprisonment. He advised the defendant to have the child vaccinated, or he would get into further trouble" (Vaccination, pg. 5). When called upon by the court to vaccinate their children, defaulters could be convicted up to eight times after continuously refusing. While many children died from smallpox, the distress resulting from compulsory vaccination laws took a toll on children and families: "It is a sickening thought that the lives and happiness of thousands of children are by law placed every day at the mercy of such work as this" (Vaccination, pg. 16). Despite the legal consequences and potential disruption to families, many remained opposed to vaccination, viewing their anti-vaccination efforts as a virtuous cause aimed at protecting societal wellbeing from the perceived dangers of this new medical practice.

In summary, the smallpox pandemic in Europe elicited medical innovation, which in turn created backlash marked by medical skepticism, government power struggles, and stigmas surrounding inoculation and vaccination. Historical resistance to these practices, rooted in moral objections, underscores the enduring complexities of navigating science, politics, and ethics during crises. Addressing skepticism and fostering trust in public health efforts is imperative, as is the need to balance government mandates with individual liberties. Further exploration of vaccination skepticism's social and economic implications is warranted, particularly concerning marginalized communities and public health interventions. To move forward, understanding historical vaccination movements is vital for informing contemporary practices. By learning from the past, we can navigate current challenges more effectively by fostering inclusivity and equity in disease prevention. Ongoing dialogue and research are essential for addressing skepticism, ensuring equitable access to vaccination, and safeguarding public health.

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