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EDITOR'S PICK

Public Health column: The birth of vaccines and vaccine hysteria

By Amber Johnson Lewis and Clark Public Health

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Arural physician in the English countryside, Edward Jenner heard stories of local farmers and milkmaids who were immune to smallpox; they had taken ill with cowpox instead, a zoonotic disease similar to smallpox, but with much less severe symptoms.

In 1796, Jenner vaccinated a boy named James Phipps with pus taken from the cowpox pustule of a milkmaid named Sarah Nelms. Young James was then exposed to the smallpox virus multiple times but never developed the disease.

After five years of further experimentation, Jenner wrote a treatise “On the Origin of the Vaccine Inoculation” and expressed hope that “the annihilation of the smallpox, the most dreadful scourge of the human species, must be the final result of this practice.”

Doctors provided Cowpox vaccinations for another 80 years to fend off smallpox. The English word “vaccine” is derived from the Latin word for cow - “vaca.”



Amber Johnson

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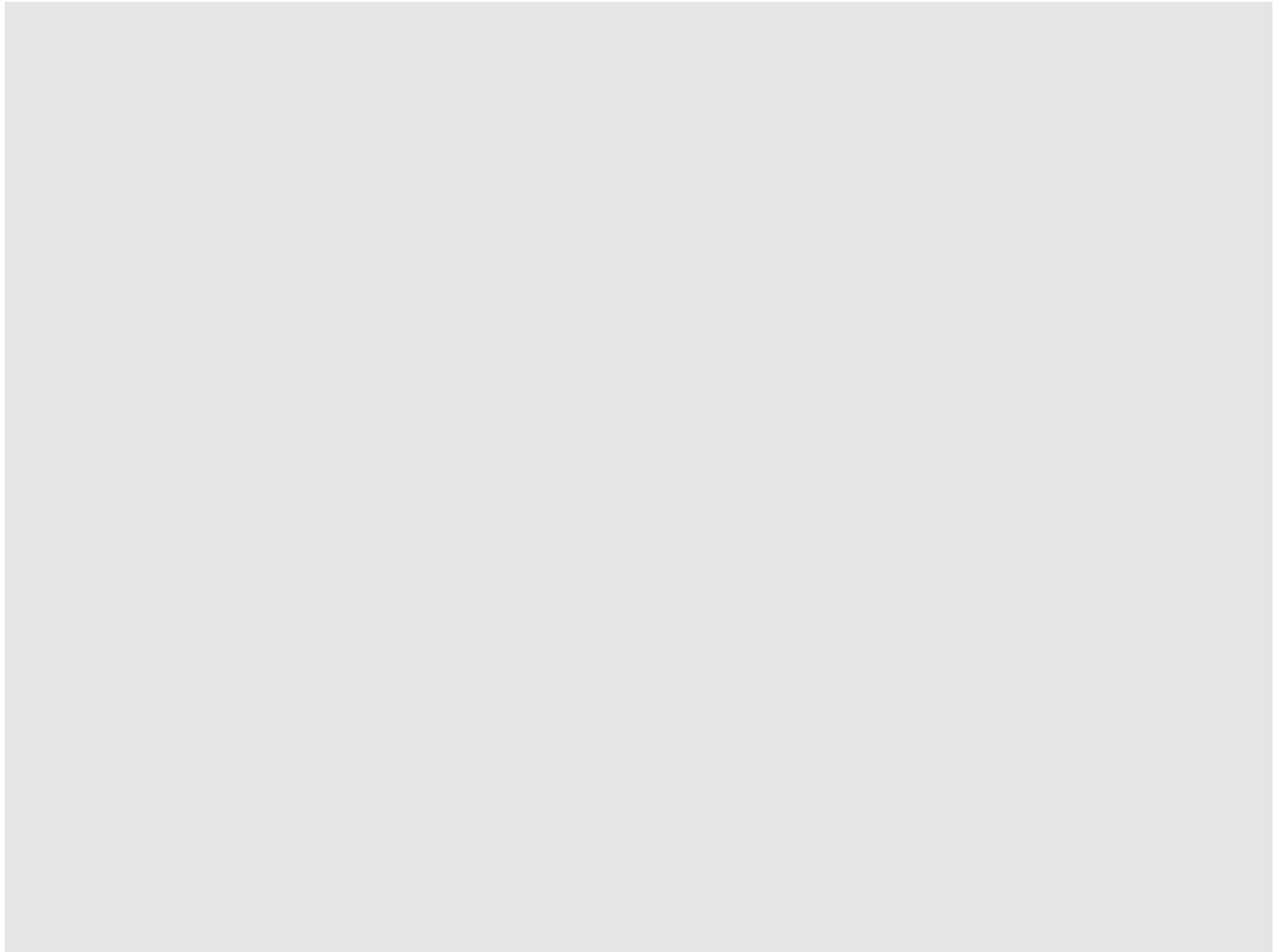
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Naturally, rumors circulated the vaccine would turn people into cows.

As long as vaccination has existed, so has its opposition. Anti-vaccination sentiments are not a modern phenomenon. Because the one thing there is not a vaccination against is fear, be it real or perceived. That is a human condition that no immunization can cure.



Edward J. Jenner vaccinating his young child held by Mrs. Jenner around 1800.

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Jenner's work was met with immediate skepticism and criticism. Objections varied; oppositions were sometimes religious, sometimes political, sometimes scientific, and sometimes sanitary. Some parents were terrified for their children. Others objected to

the perceived violation of bodily and family autonomy. Anti-vaccination leagues began to form in England and the United States.

In 1879, opponents founded the Anti-Vaccination Society of America in the United States.

In 1885, up to 100,000 anti-vaccinators led a march through Leicester, England, carrying a child's coffin, banners and an effigy of Jenner, who created the vaccine.

Afterward, to counter fear and misinformation regarding vaccinations, medical authorities commissioned the first official study and concluded what we still know today. Vaccines work.

But the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Even after the complete eradication of smallpox with vaccinations, and the near disappearance of countless communicable diseases that used to plague our societies, vaccine hesitancy and hysteria still lives on.

In 2019, only 88% of Lewis and Clark County children under the age 2 were vaccinated for polio, 83% for mumps, measles, and rubella (MMR), 82% varicella, 88% tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. The most current local data is still forthcoming.

Measles and learning from history

In 1800, more than 45% of U.S. children did not live to see their fifth birthday. In 1900, according to Statista, 30% of all deaths in the United States occurred in children less than 5 years of age. Fast forward 100 years, and in 1999, that number was just 1.4% – in large part because of vaccines.

As vaccine hesitancy and exemptions increase, so increases the risk and reemergence of communicable diseases we almost eradicated in the Western world. According to the CDC, school and daycare exemptions greater than five percent limit communal coverage and increase the risk of disease outbreaks.



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Phil Drake, Independent Record

On Nov. 16, 2023 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in collaboration with the World Health Organization, published a media release regarding an alarming spike in measles cases around the globe.

“Following years of declines in measles vaccination coverage, measles cases in 2022 have increased by 18%, and deaths have increased by 43% globally. This takes the estimated number of measles cases to 9 million and deaths to 136,000 – mostly among children...”

Measles is a highly contagious, serious airborne disease caused by a virus spread through breathing, coughing, sneezing, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us many things, including what a small world we live in and how quickly contagion can spread across borders.

According to the World Health Organization, in 2022, about 83% of the world's children received one dose of measles vaccine by their first birthday through routine health services – the lowest since 2008.

The resurgence of measles is a needless public health tragedy, the direct result of vaccine hesitancy and hysteria. Before 1963, when the measles vaccine was introduced, 2.6 million people (about the population of Mississippi), died from measles every year. Most were children under the age of five.

Declared eradicated in the United States in the year 2000, as of November 2024, Measles has now been detected in two dozen U.S. states. And it is only a matter of time before we see a spike in Montana measles cases again. It is the kind of thing that always happens to other people and other people's kids. Until it happens to you and your children.

At greatest risk are babies, unvaccinated children, and pregnant mothers. Measles is a miserable disease completely preventable with a safe and cost-effective vaccine.

Think of those 100,000 anti-vaxxers who marched through the streets of Leicester in 1885, protesting the smallpox vaccine. They were on the wrong side of history. Let us not make the same mistake.

It is never too late to get your kids vaccinated from measles.

To schedule an appointment with one of our public health nurses to discuss vaccine schedules and options, please call Lewis and Clark Public Health at 406-457-8900.

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