Vaccination Policies Contrasted

Smallpox in Boston

Between 1901 and 1903, an outbreak of smallpox occurred in Boston, which at the time had a population of about 560,000 people. Of the 1,596 reported cases of smallpox, 270 resulted in death. This means that there were roughly 3 cases per 1,000 people and the chance of dying from the devastating disease was very high (17 percent). Officials from the Boston Board of Health responded by first isolating people with smallpox in a special facility. Next, they asked people to volunteer to be vaccinated, and by the end of 1901, 400,000 Bostonians had been immunized. However, because new cases continued to appear, the Board of Health decided that anyone who had not been vaccinated since 1897 needed to get the vaccine. Doctors were sent house to house, with instructions to vaccinate everyone—except people who were ill—but not to use force. The penalty for refusing vaccination was a $5 fine or 15 days in jail.

Because homeless people were blamed for spreading the disease, special efforts were made to vaccinate them. The Board of Health sent “virus squads” into shelters and rooming houses. A reporter who followed one of these squads made the following report: “A lot of them had to be held down in their cots, one big policeman sitting on their legs, and another on their heads, while the third held the arms, bared for the doctors.” One “fighting tramp,” who “went down in a heap on the floor” from the blow of a policeman’s club, received both vaccination and stitches to his scalp. People who opposed the vaccination policy tried to bring their concerns to court in 1902 in an effort to change the Board of Health’s decision. The “Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League” believed that mandatory vaccination violated civil liberties.
Measles in Dublin

In 2000, an outbreak of measles in Ireland left three babies dead and more than 100 children hospitalized. The outbreak was linked to the sharp decrease in the number of children receiving the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine.

Public health officials blamed a vaccination rate in Dublin of about 70 percent for the outbreak. In some places, up to a quarter of children were not vaccinated. The drop in vaccinations was blamed on a lack of public confidence in the MMR vaccine, which was sparked by a 1998 report of research suggesting that it could cause autism and bowel disorders. In 2004, 10 of the 13 authors of the report retracted the study’s interpretation. Public health experts now agree that there is no such risk. However, widespread media coverage has left many parents unsure about the benefits of getting their children vaccinated. Vaccination is not mandated for public school entry in the United Kingdom.

Doctors at the Temple Street Children’s Hospital noted that they hadn’t treated any cases of measles since the 1970s. By the end of April 2000, though, doctors and the hospital had seen 313 children and babies with the disease, with 8 needing intensive care.

Many of the cases were in very young children, below the recommended age of vaccination. Doctors noted that the younger children would not have been sick if more of the older children had been vaccinated. “It is appalling, it is preventable, it should not be happening,” noted one microbiologist in a BBC News report. “People have forgotten that measles is a severe multi-system illness—that is why the vaccine was developed.”