

Representation of Vaccination in the Early 20th Century: Analyzing American Newspapers between 1915-1921

In today's society, vaccination is a highly controversial issue drawing all sorts of people into the debate from scientists and physicians to religious leaders and parents. Currently, there are many different arguments for and against vaccination. Interestingly enough, many of these arguments parallel those of the early 20th century. My goal through this research was to analyze how vaccination was framed and represented in American newspapers during the early 20th century (1915-1921). My research suggested that most newspapers framed vaccination in a positive light, with the exception of the occasional skepticism and doubt.

Using the two databases, Readex and Chronicling America (Library of Congress), I identified eight daily newspapers from across the country. I was only able to analyze six of those based on the quantity of articles. The newspapers I analyzed were: The Bemidji Daily Pioneer (Beltrami County, MN), The Idaho Statesman (Boise, ID), The Saint Joseph Observer (St. Joseph, MO), El Paso Herald (El Paso, TX), The Washington Times (D.C), and The Ogden Standard (Ogden, Utah). While reading through the newspapers, I noted how each article framed vaccination as well as any methods used to create this framework.

Purely in terms of numbers, the majority of newspapers contained articles representing vaccination in a positive light. A large number highlighted vaccination as being fast, simple, convenient, and harmless. Vaccines were

described as lifesaving and effective. Every newspaper was filled with reports on the vaccination of large groups, vaccination laws, and the progression of vaccine development and delivery. While neutral in appearance, these reports implied vaccination's mass use and demand, simply because it was being reported on. These reports, many coming from the government and other health institutions, implied a general approval of vaccination.

Newspapers used many different mechanisms to create this positive representation of vaccination. Reporting on vaccination was often in the imperative mood, grammatically, with headlines such as, "*Will Vaccinate Town,*" "*Chicago Doctor to Vaccinate Everybody,*" and "*All Pupils Will be Vaccinated.*" This language implies no room for opposition. In addition, we see newspapers using the bandwagon tactic in representing vaccination as an everyday and normal treatment. Many articles implied that everyone was getting vaccinated, therefore suggesting "you should too." One article suggested the unvaccinated should "*just fall into the procession*" because it would render them "immune-and that is something- besides *keeping you in fashion*" (SJO January 17, 1920). Vaccines being referred to as a "fad" and medical practices using the "*latest anti-toxins, serums, and vaccines*" portray vaccination as a normal treatment.

Newspapers also used scare tactics such as fear of the disease and what will happen if one remain unvaccinated, thereby framing vaccination as the only treatment with the potential to "save one's life." Disease is described in detail to elicit fear such as the typhoid vaccine in one such article, which was described as leaving "the patient *maimed for life*" with an impaired memory (IS June 15, 1915). Another article directed towards the unvaccinated talked about how "these large number of *deaths*...should be a special *warning* to the unvaccinated" (IS July

4,1915). In some cases, scare tactics dramatized the risks as a way to scare the reader to succumb to vaccination. One article stated “by neglecting to do your part (getting vaccinated) you may be the means of bringing *needless misery to those you love*”(OS April 18,1922). This statement is a guilt trip; an attempt to scare the unvaccinated into getting vaccinated in order to protect the ones they love.

The majority of newspaper articles I searched through represented vaccination in a positive light, drawing on various methods to suggest its normalcy and effectiveness. Looking through the six newspapers I analyzed, I identified four specific pro-vaccination frameworks: 1. The Analogy Framework, 2. The Historical Framework, 3. The Faith in Science Framework, and 4. The Anti Anti-Vaccination Framework.

The Analogy Framework refers to the success of the typhoid vaccine, which became an analogy for the expected success of other vaccines. During the Philippine War and the Spanish-American War the typhoid vaccine was first used to protect soldiers against typhoid. By 1911, all soldiers were required to be vaccinated against typhoid. Years later during WWI, the typhoid vaccine was held in very high esteem. One article attributed the war as demonstrating “*beyond all question the efficacy of anti-typhoid treatment,*” (OS January 13, 1915) making “*such a good record for itself on the front*” (IS January 25, 1915). The typhoid vaccine’s success set a precedent for the success of other vaccines. In one article, medical experts expressed hope that the poliomyelitis vaccine would, “*inure persons against poliomyelitis, just as an anti-typhoid vaccine now is used to combat typhoid*” (WT October 17, 1916). The typhoid vaccine became a means of comparison. In another article, the anti-influenza vaccine results were thought

to “be *almost as good as those* obtained by the anti-typhoid inoculations” (WT October 17, 1916). The typhoid vaccine earned credibility during the first two decades of the 20th century as an effective vaccine, becoming a major part of the pro-vaccination framework seen in many newspapers.

Many such papers used the typhoid vaccine’s success on the front to push for vaccine use in the civilian sector as well as to encourage vaccination for other diseases. Newspapers reporting on the success of the typhoid vaccine were pivotal in showing society that vaccines and compulsory vaccination laws have the potential to protect the human race against disease and illness. It is also important to note the close association between vaccination and the military as seen with the typhoid vaccine and with many other vaccines. Being the first to enforce large scale compulsory vaccination, military “vaccination procedures” leaked into the civilian sector: “The doctor must have been in the army...as soon as he have them lined up...he said, ‘Present arms’” (BDP January 26, 1920). It is also very ironic the relationship between war and medicine and the idea that while war kills, it also provides the context for many medical advancements (like vaccines), which prolong life. In a roundabout way, “wars help us live longer” by being on the forefront of medical advancements. It is through the typhoid vaccine that newspapers highlight the close connection between war and medical advancements as well as the potential that vaccines have to do good.

Similar to the Analogy Framework used to create a positive representation of vaccination is what I like to call the Historical Framework. This framework was based on the idea that because vaccination has put an end to disease before, it can do it again. In many newspapers, the success of vaccines were grouped together rather than accessed individually. Some articles generalized vaccines

(implying all) as being “successful creations,” having put to end “frightful epidemics” (IS August 5, 1915). In one such article vaccine therapy is described as being not a theory, “but a great life saving fact,” stating that it has “saved millions of lives, soldiers and civilians, in the course of the great war” (IS October 8, 1921). Many newspapers framed vaccination in a positive light by drawing on past successes in saving lives and protecting the people from “frightful epidemics.”

In addition to the two previous frameworks was an unquestioned faith in science that many newspapers portrayed. There was a consistent reliance on science and faith that it would inevitably prevail over disease and illness. Newspapers implied that science would “save the day” because it had done so in the past. This framework relied on the expected success of science and its great potential to “save mankind.” Many articles pushed for the discovery of a vaccine, suggesting that it was out there and that science simply needed to “find it.” Vaccine discoveries were honored as “important achievements” and accompanied by prizes to the researcher. Newspaper reports discussed vaccines as if their creation was inevitable, being simply a matter of time. One article alluded to a “race between mankind and the microbe” (WT March 9, 1915) while another stated that “when a new and unthought of disease bursts upon man there evolves with almost *equal expectedness* an enzyme, an anti-toxin and a vaccine to combat the ravages” (WT September 29, 1915). Many newspapers supported the future of vaccines with an unwavering faith that science would ultimately prevail.

Diseases and vaccines were personified to further this framework. Vaccines were talked about as “stamping” out disease, “cleaning up” disease,

“checking disease,” “robbing the epidemic of its power,” and being the “foe” of disease. Contrarily, diseases were talked about, as “assaulting” the human race. Personification of vaccines and diseases gave them “living characteristics” making for a stronger and more dramatic argument. In addition, in conjunction with faith in medicine and science there are numerous reports and advertisements on so-called “autogenous” vaccines being used “for every kind of illness ranging from hay fever, acne, pyorrhea, boils, chronic bronchitis, asthma, carbuncle, rheumatiz, seborrhea, and joint diseases.” The implication here is that a vaccine can be developed for any illness.

In addition to these positive representations of vaccines were counterarguments to many anti-vaccination frameworks: thus, the anti anti-vaccine framework. Many articles referred to anti-vaccination ideas and countered them to further their approval of vaccination. The “vaccines are dirty argument” was countered with articles describing vaccines as “pure,” “clean,” “fresh,” and “safe.” The “vaccines cause disease argument” was countered by a shift in blame from the vaccines themselves carrying disease to improper vaccination aftercare causing disease. One article blamed tetanus on the “contamination of the wound *subsequent* to vaccination...the same manner as infection of any other surgical wound” (WT August 13, 1915). Another counter argument directly attacked anti-vaccinationists as being “slackers,” “over emotional,” “ignorant,” not “fact-based,” and having “an unconscious religion” in an attempt to destroy their reputation and therefore their argument (SJO June 16, 1917). It is through careful word choice (sometimes subtle) that many newspapers rejected anti-vaccination ideas, simultaneously furthering a positive representation of vaccination.

While most newspapers published pro-vaccination articles, it is still important to acknowledge the fear and skepticism present in many newspaper articles. Many newspapers were cautious and suspicious about the claims made by science based in experience. Moving forward into the Progressive Era elicited many cautious and suspicious reactions to new treatments and the changing medical world. This turned into skepticism about vaccination. Looking through the six selected newspapers, I identified seven frameworks creating a negative picture of vaccination: 1. Vaccines are Mysterious, 2. Vaccines Weaken the Body and Cause Disease, 3. Vaccines are Dirty, 4. Vaccines Have Dangerous Potentials, 5. Vaccines Have Bad Side Effects, 6. Alternative Treatments are Better, and 7. Vaccination Laws are an Infringement on Individual Rights. A couple of newspaper articles questioned the vaccination situation at the time as going “too far” making one “feel as perforated as a Swiss cheese or a porous plaster.” One article joked, “the inoculation fashion is *holesome* to say the least” (WT December 18, 1917). Another article played on the same concept: “Don’t you think there ought to be a *closed season* for human beings as with deer? –Life” (OS December 21, 1916).

Much skepticism about vaccination stemmed from the idea that one cannot “see” or “know” what is in a vaccine. The element of trust in the experts who create and administer the vaccine became a major groundwork for suspicion. We can see this in the discussion of vaccines in many newspapers. Many articles directed attention to the “unknown” in vaccines. The idea that something such as lockjaw could “lurk” in a vaccine made many justifiably uneasy and skeptical. Another article called vaccination “the most unscientific prophylactic procedure in use in civilized communities at the present time”

arguing, “no one knows what vaccine is” (ID July 7,1918). With the mysteriousness of vaccines came the dangerous potentials recognized by a couple of newspapers. This potential originated from the idea that it is impossible to know exactly what is in a vaccine. Anything could be added to a vaccine and the person being vaccinated would never know. Therefore, vaccines were portrayed in some instances as dangerous weapons. One article mentioned a “*poison plot*” which was “believed to be nation wide in scope” (WT November 15,1915). Another reported on “a nation-wide plot to kill soldiers by *poisoning vaccine serum with tetanus germs*” (BDP October 31,1917). Newspaper representation of vaccines as mysterious and having dangerous potentials contributed to the vaccination skepticism.

In conjunction with the mysteriousness of vaccines is the possibility that vaccines could contain disease. Some newspapers discussed vaccination not as a protective measure rather “an inoculation with disease” that can kill the person. Someone could be vaccinated to protect against one disease, while consequently becoming susceptible to another. An example is seen with the smallpox vaccine and the belief while you will be protecting against smallpox you may be giving “the patient something else (infantile paralysis)” (SJO October 28, 1916). Another article talked about a mother who was told by anti-vaccinationist friends to “never allow her (9th month old) to be vaccinated, because *it causes lockjaw*” (WT August 30, 1915). Similarly, vaccines were portrayed as being “dirty” and “impure,” “poisoning the blood of millions” by giving blood “an abnormal composition.” Some newspaper articles represented vaccination as illogical arguing that it did not make sense to inject germs into a healthy human being, with the idea that it would establish immunity. One article talked about how it

would be “*folly* to vaccinate against it (smallpox), because vaccination produces a type of smallpox” (WT February 23,1916). Some newspaper articles represented vaccination as backwards: Why inject oneself with the very thing to be protected against? This distrust in medicine as well as the seeming illogical rationale behind vaccination contributed to the skepticism that many newspapers reported on.

Vaccination was also poorly represented in the personal stories of the bad side effects and discomforts experienced after vaccination, particularly with soldiers during the war. These accounts and reports shed negative light on the whole vaccination experience. There were numerous reports of soldiers experiencing discomfort, being “under the weather,” as a result of “suffering from vaccination.” One soldier spoke very bluntly about his experience, “Well, Doc, we were laid out that night. I had a *fever* of 498 or thereabouts, a *headache*, *sweat* and *pains* from head to foot. Say, I was sick” (OS September 5, 1918). In addition to the poor vaccination side effects were the suggestive alternative treatments intended to be used in place of vaccine treatments. Some newspaper articles focused on faith, nature’s curative power, fresh air, and holistic medicine as better treatments than medical treatments such as vaccination. One article talked about health of the body being the “only safeguard against disease” and that “soisoux and serums can never wholly protect it” (SJO April 8, 1916). Another believed, “we could easily save one hundred thousand lives annually in the US if all the people would adopt the system of fresh air...*the important thing is right living, good food, and plenty of fresh air*” (BDP December 13, 1918). Many chiropractic ads attacked the core of vaccine therapy stating that disease was not the result of germs rather “the result of interruptions and misalignments in the

body.” Therefore chiropractors, who are trained to treat these interruptions and misalignments “*save more lives over medical treatments (like vaccines)*” (BDP March 9,1920).

The most common vaccination opposition represented in the newspapers was the opposition to compulsory vaccination laws. Newspapers reported on people’s feelings and opinions towards these laws, which many viewed as infringements on individual liberties and constitutional rights. Reports showed that many people believed they should have control over their bodies and any decisions regarding it. One article reported a coast guard man quitting his job to avoid vaccination because he did not want to “submit to what I consider an *infringement upon individual constitutional rights*” (WT February 28, 1915). In response to a school requirement to vaccinate the children, a mother responded, “the school is public, but I want to say that they *child is not*. He is not to be *exploited* by any individual who happens to have an opinion” (SJO January 12, 1918). In opposition to compulsory laws another citizen stated, “Has any man or body of men *the right* to say that you shall be treated by a certain method? Has anyone *the right* to say that you must be treated at all if you do not want to be? Has any doctor *the right* to lacerate your body without your consent? Does it pay to take chances of having some constitutional disease introduced rather than taking chances of smallpox? Does it look reasonable that by introducing pus into a normal person to create more pus is a beneficial way to offset disease?” (SJO January 31, 1920). While the majority of newspaper articles represented vaccination in a positive light, skepticism and fear was without a doubt an important piece of the vaccination story in the early 20th century.

Lastly, it is important to recognize the confusing language and contradictory reports seen in many newspapers with regard to the influenza vaccine. At the time, the causative agent behind influenza had not been identified. Because the influenza pandemic was so virulent, vaccines were being created left and right with the expectation that one would prove effective. Influenza vaccine development became a guessing game. As a result newspaper reports on the vaccine were inconclusive and many were contradictory. Some articles recognized the vaccine as still being in its “developmental stages” while others would advise that everyone get vaccinated implying otherwise. This lack of consistency stemming from the gap in underlying science (identification of the germ) led to contradictory reporting of the influenza vaccine and confusing language. We can see this directly in the confusing word choice: the influenza vaccine “will *pretty certainly modify* and shorten the attack” and it will “confer *almost absolute* immunity.” The words “pretty” and “certainly” oppose one another just like “almost” and “absolute” do. Newspaper representation of the influenza vaccine was very inconsistent, which would have made it difficult for the public to form opinions.

Overall, newspaper representation of vaccination in the early 20th century was positive. Newspapers generally acknowledged vaccine effectiveness and approved of the treatment. While I did identify a decent amount of skepticism, the newspapers generally represented vaccination in a positive light, with the exception of the *Saint Joseph Observer*. The *Saint Joseph Observer* in comparison to the other newspapers had significantly more anti-vaccination sentiment. Why The *Saint Joseph Observer* had significantly more anti-vaccination articles is unknown; however, this finding implies that vaccination opposition may have

been localized to specific regions. This finding also suggests that we could miss a lot about anti-vaccination discourse based on the newspapers chosen. Therefore, to further this research and to really get at anti-vaccination sentiment it is important to find other localities that reported on vaccination opposition in significant numbers. In comparison to modern day medicine, we see similar pro and anti vaccination discourse. We see parents convinced that vaccination caused their child's autism paralleling the early 20th century argument that vaccines carry disease. We see individuals refusing to get vaccinated feeling as though their bodies should not be regulated by the state. Contrarily, we see vaccination being viewed as a simple, effective, life-saving treatment. Almost a century has passed and the arguments for and against vaccination are still very similar.

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