

Benjamin Franklin's fight against a deadly virus when colonial America was divided over smallpox inoculation

July 2 2021, by Mark Canada and Christian Chauret

THE New-England Courant.

MONDAY August 7. 1721.

Homo non-unius Negotii: Or, Jack of all Trades.

M^r John Checkley

IT'S an hard Case, that a Man can't appear in Print now a Days, unless he'll undergo the Mortification of Answering to ten thousand senseless and Impertinent Questions like these, Pray Sir, from whence came you? And what Age may you be of, may I be so bold? Was you bred at Colledge Sir? And can you (like some of them) square the Circle, and cypher as far as the Black Art? &c. Now, tho' I must confess it's something to come to a Man in his, thus to be stop'd at his first setting-out, yet in Compliance to the Custom of the Country where I now sit for an Author, I'll immediately stop short, and give my gentle Reader some Account of my Person and my rare Endowments.

As for my Age, I'm some odd Years and a few Days under twice twenty and three, therefore I hope no One will hereafter object against my soaring now and then with the grave Wits of the Age, since I have dropt my callow Feathers, and am pretty well fild'g'd: but if they should tell me that I am not yet fit nor worthy to keep Company with such Illustrious Sages, for my Beard do's not yet reach down to my Girdle, I shall make them no other Answer than this, Barba non tacit Philosophum.

I make no Question my gentle Readers, but that you're very Impatient to see me intirely dissolved, and to have a full View of my outward as well as inward Man, but as I stop short just now, merely to oblige you, so I shall stop as short here, and give no farther Account of my self until this Day fortnight, when you shall have a farther Account of this useful Design, and of my rare Endowments of Body and Mind.

As to engage the World to converse farther with me, I find me in the good Company of a certain Set of Men, of whom I hope to give a very good Account.

Who like faithful Shepherds take care of their Flocks, By teaching and practising what's Orthodox, Pray hard against Sickness, yet preach up the P O X!

N. B. This Paper will be published once a Fortnight, and out of my Kindness to my Brother-Writers, I intend now and then to be (like them) very, very dull; for I have a strong Fancy, that whilst I am sometimes fat and long this Paper will not be very grateful to them.

Dr Douglas
abnormis sapient. — Hon.

At the Request of several Gentlemen in Town: A Continuation of the History of Inoculation in Boston, by a Society of the Practitioners in Physick.

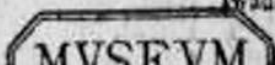
THe bold undertaker of the Practice of the Greek old Women, notwithstanding the Terror and Confusion from his Son's Inoculation-Fever, proceeds to inoculate Persons from Seventy Years of Age and downwards.

The Select Men (or Managers of the Town Affairs) in duty bound to take Cognizance of the Matter, desire a Meeting of all the Practitioners in Town, to have their Opinion whether the Practice ought to be allowed or not; they unanimously agreed that it was rash and dubious, being entirely new, not in the least vouch'd or recommended (being merely published, in the Philosophick Transactions by way of Amusement) from Britain, tho' it came to us via London from the Turks, and by a strong *vera voce* Evidence, was proved to be of fatal & dangerous Consequence. B——n is desired by the Select Men to desist.

Notwithstanding the general Aversion of the Town, in Contradiction to the declared Opinion of the Practitioners, in Opposition to the Selectmen, and in Spite of the discouraging Evidences relating to this Practice, Six Gentlemen of Piety and Learning, profoundly ignorant of the Matter, after serious Consideration of a Disease one of the most intricate practical Cases in Physick, do on the Merits of their Characters, and for no other reason, with a *Vox praterias; nihil, assert, &c.* If this Argument, viz. their Character, should prevail with the Populace (tho' here I think they have missed of their Aim) who knows but it may oblige some propitane Person to canvas that sort of Argument. I think their Character ought to be facied, and that they themselves ought not to give the least Occasion to have it called in question. They set up for Judges of a Man's Qualifications in the Practice of Physick, and very lavishly bestow all the fulsome common Place of *Quack Advertisements*. One would think they meant some *Romantick Character*, something beyond that of candid *Sydenham*, the sagacious *Kadettif*, or the celebrated *Mead*: They might indeed in respect of his moral and religious Qualifications, which lay properly under their Cognizance, have said, That he was a modest, humble Man, a Man of Continency, Probity, &c.

At first reading of this Compendure, many were persuaded, that it was only a Piece of Humour, Baister,

Bulefque,



From its first edition, The New-England Courant covered inoculation. Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Exactly 300 years ago, in 1721, Benjamin Franklin and his fellow American colonists [faced a deadly smallpox outbreak](#). Their varying responses constitute an eerily prescient object lesson for today's world, similarly devastated by a virus and divided over vaccination three centuries later.

As [a microbiologist](#) and [a Franklin scholar](#), we see some parallels between then and now that could help governments, journalists and the rest of us cope with the coronavirus pandemic and future threats.

Smallpox strikes Boston

Smallpox was nothing new in 1721. Known to have affected people for [at least 3,000 years](#), it ran rampant in Boston, eventually striking [more than half the city's population](#). The virus killed about [1 in 13 residents](#)—but the death toll was probably more, since the lack of sophisticated epidemiology made it impossible to identify the cause of all deaths.

What was new, at least to Boston, was a simple procedure that could protect people from the disease. It was known as "variolation" or "inoculation," and involved deliberately exposing someone to the [smallpox](#) "matter" from a victim's scabs or pus, injecting the material into the skin using a needle. This approach typically caused a mild disease and induced a state of "immunity" against smallpox.

Even today, the exact mechanism is [poorly understood](#) and not much

research on variolation has been done. Inoculation through the skin seems to activate an immune response that leads to milder symptoms and less transmission, possibly because of the route of infection and the lower dose. Since it relies on activating the [immune response](#) with live smallpox variola virus, inoculation is different from the modern vaccination that eradicated smallpox using the much less harmful but related vaccinia virus.

The inoculation treatment, which originated in Asia and Africa, came to be known in Boston [thanks to a man named Onesimus](#). By 1721, [Onesimus was enslaved](#), owned by the most influential man in all of Boston, the Rev. Cotton Mather.

Known primarily as a Congregational minister, [Mather was also a scientist](#) with a special interest in biology. He paid attention when [Onesimus told him](#) "he had undergone an operation, which had given him something of the smallpox and would forever preserve him from it; adding that it was often used" in West Africa, where he was from.

Inspired by this information from Onesimus, Mather teamed up with a Boston physician, [Zabdiel Boylston](#), to conduct a scientific study of inoculation's effectiveness worthy of 21st-century praise. They found that of the approximately 300 people Boylston had inoculated, [2% had died](#), compared with almost 15% of those who contracted smallpox from nature.

The findings seemed clear: Inoculation could help in the fight against smallpox. Science won out in this clergyman's mind. But others were not convinced.

Stirring up controversy

A local newspaper editor named James Franklin had his own

affliction—namely an insatiable hunger for controversy. Franklin, who was no fan of Mather, set about attacking inoculation in his newspaper, *The New-England Courant*.

One article from August 1721 tried to guilt readers into resisting inoculation. If someone gets inoculated and then spreads the disease to someone else, who in turn dies of it, [the article asked](#), "at whose hands shall their Blood be required?" The same article went on to say that "Epidemical Distempers" such as smallpox come "as Judgments from an angry and displeased God."

In contrast to Mather and Boylston's research, the *Courant's* articles were designed not to discover, but to sow doubt and distrust. The argument that inoculation might help to spread the disease posits something that was theoretically possible—at least if simple precautions were not taken—but it seems beside the point. If inoculation worked, wouldn't it be worth this small risk, especially since widespread inoculations would dramatically decrease the likelihood that one person would infect another?

Franklin, the *Courant's* editor, had a kid brother apprenticed to him at the time—a teenager by the name of Benjamin.

Historians don't know which side the younger Franklin took in 1721—or whether he took a side at all—but his subsequent approach to inoculation years later has lessons for the world's current encounter with a deadly virus and a divided response to a vaccine.

Independent thought

You might expect that James' little brother would have been inclined to oppose inoculation as well. After all, [thinking like family members and others you identify with](#) is a common human tendency.

That he was capable of overcoming this inclination shows Benjamin Franklin's capacity for independent thought, an asset that would serve him well throughout his life as a writer, scientist and statesman. While sticking with social expectations confers certain advantages in certain settings, being able to shake off these norms when they are dangerous is also valuable. We believe the most successful people are the ones who, like Franklin, have the intellectual flexibility to choose between adherence and independence.

Truth, not victory

What happened next shows that Franklin, unlike his brother—and plenty of pundits and politicians in the 21st century—was more interested in discovering the truth than in [proving he was right](#).

Perhaps the inoculation controversy of 1721 had helped him to understand an unfortunate phenomenon that continues to plague the U.S. in 2021: When people take sides, progress suffers. [Tribes](#), whether long-standing or newly formed around an issue, can devote their energies to [demonizing the other side](#) and rallying their own. Instead of attacking the problem, they attack each other.

Franklin, in fact, became convinced that inoculation was a sound approach to preventing smallpox. Years later he intended to have his son Francis inoculated after recovering from a case of diarrhea. But before inoculation took place, the 4-year-old boy contracted smallpox and died in 1736. Citing a rumor that Francis had died because of inoculation and noting that such a rumor might deter parents from exposing their children to this procedure, Franklin made a point of setting the record straight, explaining that the child had "[receiv'd the Distemper in the common Way of Infection](#)."

Writing his autobiography in 1771, Franklin reflected on the tragedy and

used it to advocate for inoculation. He explained that he "[regretted bitterly and still regret](#)" not inoculating the boy, adding, "This I mention for the sake of parents who omit that operation, on the supposition that they should never forgive themselves if a child died under it; my example showing that the regret may be the same either way, and that, therefore, the safer should be chosen."

A scientific perspective

A final lesson from 1721 has to do with the importance of a truly scientific perspective, one that embraces science, facts and objectivity.

Inoculation was a relatively new procedure for Bostonians in 1721, and this lifesaving method was not without deadly risks. To address this paradox, several physicians meticulously collected data and compared the number of those who died because of natural smallpox with deaths after smallpox inoculation. Boylston essentially carried out what today's researchers would call a clinical study on the efficacy of inoculation. Knowing he needed to demonstrate the usefulness of [inoculation](#) in a diverse population, he [reported in a short book](#) how he inoculated nearly 300 individuals and carefully noted their symptoms and conditions over days and weeks.

The recent emergency-use authorization of [mRNA-based](#) and [viral-vector vaccines](#) for COVID-19 has produced a vast array of [hoaxes, false claims and conspiracy theories](#), especially in various social media. Like 18th-century inoculations, these vaccines represent new scientific approaches to vaccination, but ones that are based on decades of scientific research and clinical studies.

We suspect that if he were alive today, Benjamin Franklin would want his example to guide modern scientists, politicians, journalists and everyone else making personal health decisions. Like Mather and

Boylston, Franklin was a scientist with a respect for evidence and ultimately for truth.

When it comes to a deadly virus and a divided response to a preventive treatment, Franklin was clear what he would do. It doesn't take a visionary like Franklin to accept the evidence of medical science today.

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