December 16, 1922

Smallpox
A Test of Civilization

The marked increase in smallpox in recent years all over the civilized world is one of a group of facts that have disquieted many observers. Smallpox is a preventable disease, the first of the infectious diseases demonstrated to be preventable by inoculation. The evidence is so clear, so unmistakable and so convincing that it is a perpetual wonder that opposition can raise its head. But indifference to the protective value of vaccination and even definite hostility to its practice are today exceedingly common.

Neglect of vaccination, and its concomitant, the increase of smallpox, is but one of several striking manifestations of the breakdown of authority in the modern world. No longer do the mass of mankind receive submissively their opinions from the educated and informed. For better or worse they are attempting to form their own opinions and to act for themselves. The age of pure reason, however, has not yet dawned. Too often opinions are based on prejudice, on chance experience, on a persuasive but selfishly interested tongue, on the advertising exigencies of newspapers, on the dictum of a demagogue. To a large extent, this has been true always and everywhere; but what now disturbs many careful students of civilization is the widespread disposition to resent all attempts at direction by the better trained and better educated members of the community. In many places and on many subjects simple advocacy of a cause by the “intelligentsia” has been sufficient to rouse bitter antagonism on the part of the “proletariat.” Seemingly few people nowadays want to accept advice or to regard anything as proved unless it has come within the scope of their own experience. But a state of chaos is certainly not the most comfortable state of human existence, and we trust not the final one.

In the general inclination to kick over the traces and to distrust the knowledge and the disinterestedness of every one but oneself, public health matters have not escaped. Vaccination is resorted to only if one happens to feel like it. Duty to one’s associates or to the general public may go hang. This may be a transient mood or it may be a symptom of serious disease in the body politic. One thing is certain: The fact itself must be faced. If the time is going or has already gone when compulsion of the many by the few is possible or even when the many are willing to accept the counsel of the few, the only course open is the education of public opinion. If health regulations along with other governmental measures cannot be accepted on the word of the best informed, then the alternative is to persuade the mass of the people of the desirability of such regulations.

It is not to be believed that civilization will throw overboard, without a struggle, its hard-won gains. Already in several states in this country battle has been joined with the forces of prejudice and ignorance. A vigorous campaign of education is in order on the vaccination question. The smallpox situation is not too reassuring, the mild form of the disease which has mostly prevailed in the United States in recent years is being supplemented in certain localities by a more virulent type of infection. Last year Kansas City was visited by a severe outbreak; now Denver is suffering from a visitation of highly fatal smallpox. According to the reports of the U. S. Public Health Service for the week ending October 28, there were 57 cases and 17 deaths from smallpox in Denver as compared with 55 cases and 0 deaths in the rest of the United States. For the week ending November 11 Denver had 72 cases and 21 deaths; the outbreak is evidently highly virulent. There is no reason for supposing the virulent type of the disease to be any less contagious than the mild type. In the interest of humanity it is to be hoped that a calamitous object-lesson on a yet larger scale may not be the only means of bringing about more general vaccination. It is possibly true that hereafter important public health measures can be carried out, not on the counsel of experts but on the basis of a majority vote. Those who say civilization is on trial may be right, and it may be necessary to use all our resources to educate the majority of the people, in order to avoid slipping back into the Dark Ages. But there ought to be less costly methods of convincing the people of this country of the value of vaccination than a general outbreak of virulent smallpox.


Editor’s Note: JAMA Revisited is transcribed verbatim from articles published previously, unless otherwise noted.