

The Role of Religious Leaders in Public Health: Historically Informed Approaches to Promoting Novel Vaccinations and the Equitable Provision of Care

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Abstract:

The rapid development and implementation of novel mRNA vaccines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accompanying vaccine hesitancy it has prompted, harkens to the discovery and subsequent distribution of cowpox vaccination throughout early 19th century England in the face of smallpox epidemics. As COVID-19 vaccination initially rates stalled and disparities in access broadened by race and ethnicity, creative partnerships were felt to be increasingly important to dispel vaccination myths and promote health equity. Faced with a similar crisis of confidence in the novel cow-pox vaccine in the early 19th century, Reverend Rowland Hill befriended Edward Jenner and became an ardent cow-pox vaccination advocate and public health practitioner. Hill sought to (1) educate diverse English communities on the benefits of proper vaccination, (2) engage clergy as influential community-based vaccination advocates and providers, and (3) increase vaccination equity. Importantly, his efforts contributed to the decline of smallpox in 19th century England. Today, his example should continue to instruct public health practitioners and community leaders. However, gaps exist in current literature to tie together the historical anti-vaccination movement in the context of novel vaccines and the role that religious officials can have in public health efforts. This paper will address that gap and describe how vaccination advocates can learn from Hill's

context and example to defend COVID-19 vaccines against anti-vaccination rhetoric, engage community leaders as advocates, and increase vaccination access. Ultimately, Hill's success in propagating a novel cow-pox vaccination throughout pre-Victorian England is an encouragement that coordinated campaigns can overcome hesitancy, engage community leaders, and promote vaccine equity.