The role of religious leaders in public health: Historic and contemporary examples of how religious leaders can influence public health decisions and promote vaccination rates.

**Statement of the Problem**

The novel COVID-19 mRNA vaccination has prompted increased rates of vaccine hesitancy and distrust. As vaccination rates stall and disparities broaden by race and ethnicity, creative partnerships are increasingly important to dispel vaccine myths and promote health equity.

**Background**

Novel vaccine: both new in disease target and is mechanistically innovative.

One of the earliest novel vaccines was the cowpox vaccine, discovered by Edward Jenner in 1796. This was more effective in the defense of smallpox than compared to the cowpox vaccination, a method of defending against smallpox that had been used for centuries. In modern day, the H1N1 vaccine and the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine are excellent in disease target and is

Gaps exist in tying together the historical anti-vaccination movement in the context of novel vaccines and the role that religious officials can have in public health efforts.

When we look back to the 19th c. and early anti-vaccination movement, not only do we find defenders, public educators, and providers in medical practitioners, but we find the same in religious leaders too.

A prime example stems from Anglican Reverend Rowland Hill, who befriended Edward Jenner and became an ardent vaccination advocate and public health practitioner in addition to his role as a clergyman. He sought to:

- Educate diverse English communities on the benefits of proper vaccination
- Engage clergy as influential community-based vaccination advocates and providers
- Increase vaccination equity

**Findings**

Cowpox and Smallpox

Hill used his position within the clergy to provide congruents access to healthcare to ensure safety and comfort in daily life in addition to their salvation.

- Established the non-denominational Surrey Chapel in London in 1783
- Hill established a vaccination board and gave the Royal Jennerian Society a home base from which to provide vaccinations and education anyone in the public who desired it
- Vaccines were administered free of charge to anyone
- Hill instructed ministers throughout England on the use of the lancet to increase vaccination rates

**H1N1**

During the 2009–2010 H1N1 pandemic, surveys indicate that only 38% of those asked were willing to get the novel H1N1 vaccine. Major concerns included:

- Mistrust in information
- Lack of belief in available scientific information
- Poor treatment of vaccine hesitant individuals

**COVID-19**

Review of the available data indicates that there are several major thrusts to anti-vaccination movements by religious practitioners:

- The experimental nature of vaccines
- Alleged deleterious side effects
- Worry for vaccine "passports" and increasing governmental power vs. religious freedoms
- Mistrust in scientists and government officials
- Postulated links to abortions
- Vaccination indicating a lack of faith in God(s)

In a review through Peer Research group, those interviewed that, in terms of trusted information, people trusted the Clergy only second to a PCP if they had one. Far below that fell government, media outlets, etc.

Hill penned his own work, "In a concise and plain style, and at a low price, containing an abridgment of what has hitherto been published," documenting his knowledge of the cowpox vaccination.

**Methods**

Extensive literature review of 26 primary and secondary sources including publications by Reverend Rowland Hill and Edward Jenner.

- Literature by Jenner and members of the Royal Jennerian Society
- Memoirs of Rowland Hill
- Publications to defend the cowpox vaccines against antivaccination arguments
- Data was also collected from the CDC on COVID-19 and H1N1 vaccination rates

**Conclusions/Implications**

We believe that this area of research is incredibly important for the future of society oriented preventive medicine, as the use of novel vaccines is not limited to the context of infectious diseases.

This will continue to be an important conversation and likely point of contention throughout American culture in the decades to come.

As a group of community leaders, we need to start improving the interdisciplinary support and communication between laypeople and the medical field to engage with and address their concerns.

COVID-19 vaccination rates could be improved throughout the country through better engagement by medical practitioners with important religious leaders throughout the nation, given their influence on American culture as demonstrated.

This is a great moment for the church to say, no matter how well-intentioned someone’s opinions may be, if they’re not based upon the facts, the church should not endorse them.

Francis Collins, former NIH Leader

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**Objectives**

- Demonstrate the influence of Rowland Hill as a cleric and member of the Royal Jennerian Society in the accessibility of novel cowpox vaccination
- Through the example of Rowland Hill, show how community religious leaders can influence their congregants’ participation and trust in public health efforts to:
  - Defend novel vaccinations, such as the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine, against anti-vaccination rhetoric
  - Engage community leaders as vaccination advocates
  - Increase vaccination access