

The Role of Religious Leaders in Public Health

Historically Informed Approaches to Promoting Novel Vaccinations

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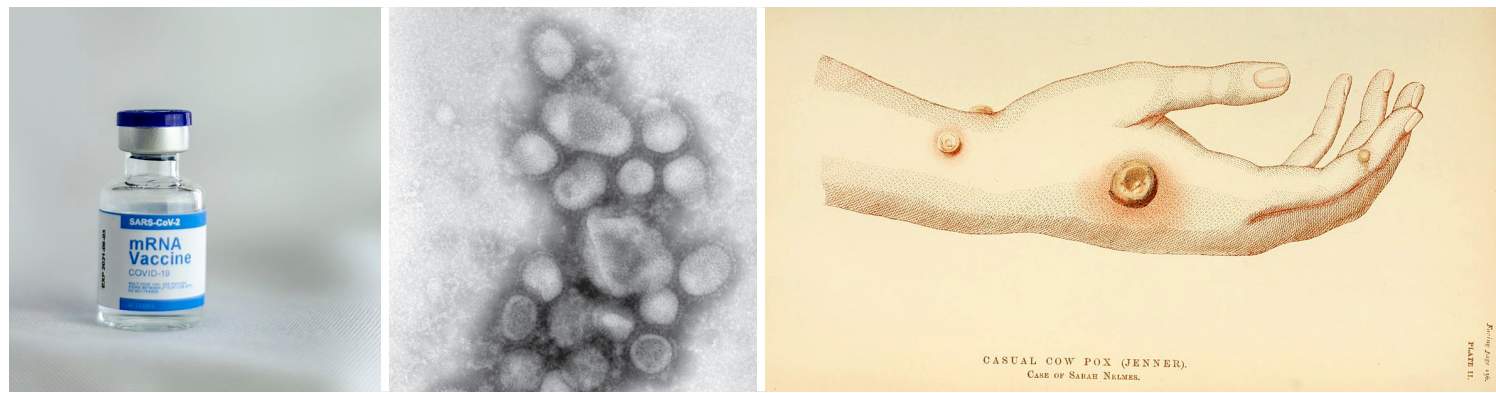
Statement of the Problem

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 vaccination 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 compared to the cowpox variolation, a method of defending against smallpox that had been used for centuries prior.

In modern day, the H1N1 vaccine and the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine are excellent correlates to the cowpox vaccine.

Our modern increase in vaccine hesitancy is not so dissimilar to that brought on by the introduction of the cowpox vaccination.

Currently, no major religion explicitly prohibits vaccination. Rather, many tracts of religion actively support social justice movements and community health.

“ Nothing can equal either the ignorance or the art of those against the Cow-pock [vaccine] in their attempts to alarm the public mind by holding up the Cow-pock [vaccine] as the venom of a beastly or bestial disease...”

Rev. Rowland Hill

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

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

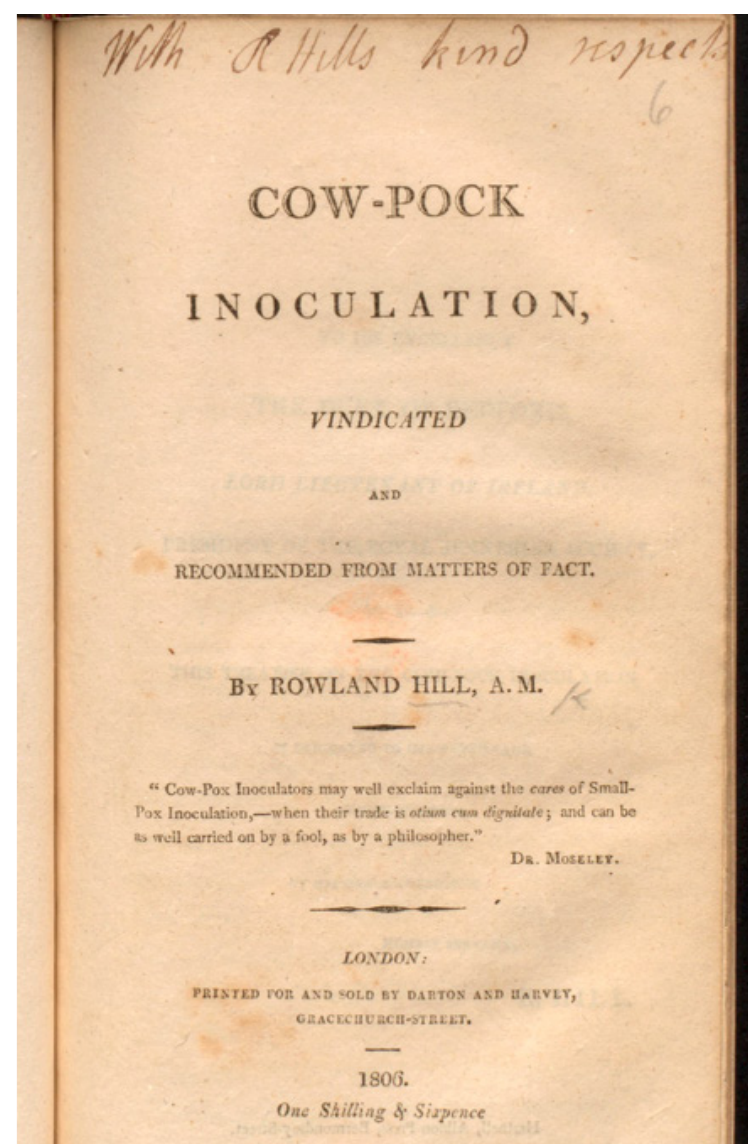
Hill used his position within the clergy to provide congregants access to healthcare to ensure safety and comfort in daily life in addition to their salvation.

- 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



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

- Documented vaccination efforts and follow ups with patients



- Laid out the basis for the anti-vaccinarian arguments, meeting each point with clear and defined reasons as to why it was invalid using vernacular language without medical jargon

“ Any discovery which ameliorates human woe, well deserves the patronage of all those who wish to exemplify the truly Christian mind.

Rev. Rowland Hill

H1N1

During the 2009–10 H1N1 pandemic, surveys indicate that only 36.1% 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 Pew 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.

Far more U.S. worshippers say their clergy have encouraged COVID-19 vaccines than discouraged them

Among U.S. adults who typically attend religious services at least monthly or attended in person in the last month, % who say their clergy have...

	Encouraged people to get a vaccine	Discouraged people to get a vaccine	Not said much about the vaccines either way
All U.S. religious attendees	39%	6%	54%
Protestant	33	3	62
Evangelical	21	4	73
Mainline	42	1	54
Historically Black	64	2	34
Catholic	42	3	52

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. “Most Americans Who Go to Religious Services Say They Would Trust Their Clergy’s Advice on COVID-19 Vaccines”

Among those who attend religious services, most trust clergy as source of information about COVID-19 vaccines

Among U.S. adults who typically attend religious services at least monthly or attended in person in the last month, % who say they have at least ‘a fair amount’ of confidence in _____ to provide guidance about receiving a COVID-19 vaccine

Their primary care doctor	84%
The clergy or other religious leaders at their houses of worship	61
Public health officials such as those at the CDC	60
Their local elected officials	50
Their state elected officials	49
The news media	41

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. “Most Americans Who Go to Religious Services Say They Would Trust Their Clergy’s Advice on COVID-19 Vaccines”

Methods

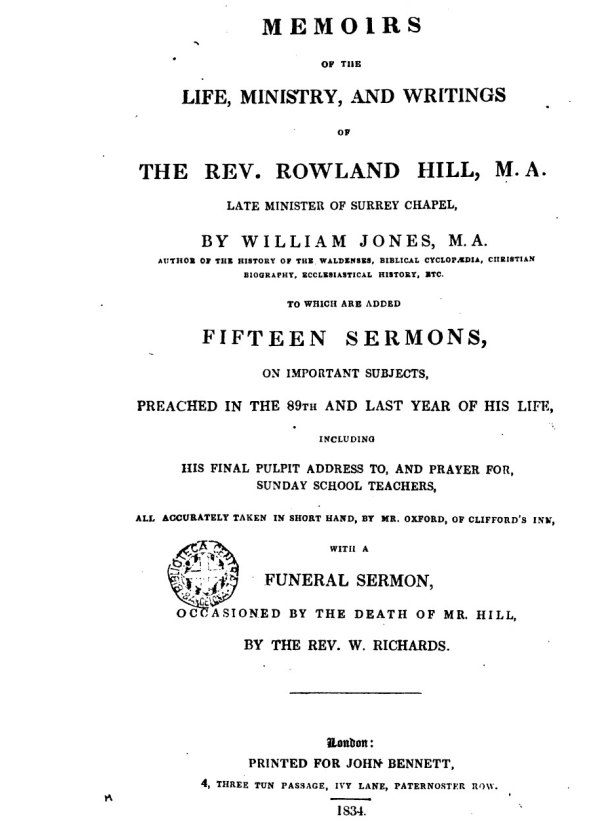
Extensive literature review of 26 primary and secondary sources including publications by Reverend Rowland Hill and Edward Jenner.

- Literature by Jenner and members of the Royal Jennerian Society
- Memoirs of Rowland Hill
- Publications to defend the cowpox vaccines against antivaccinarian arguments

Data was also collected from the CDC on COVID-19 and H1N1 vaccination rates.

Secondary sources from medical journals and accessed through PubMed and Anschutz Strauss Library databases, focused on:

- The impact of Rowland Hill
- Modern examples of novel vaccinations
- The disparities surrounding vaccine distribution
- Public reactions to these vaccines



Conclusions/Implications

Through Hill’s efforts to:

1. Educate communities on benefits of proper vaccination
2. Engage clergy as influential vaccine advocates
3. Increase vaccination equity

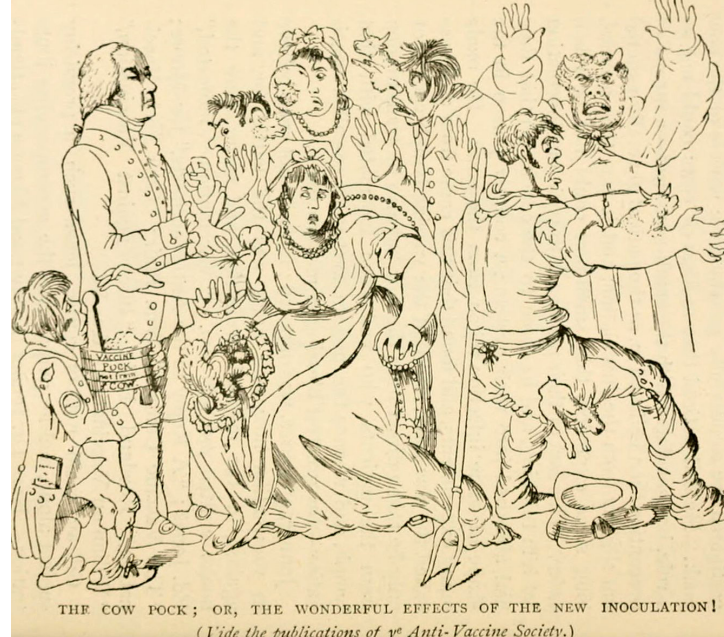
he clearly stands out as a vaccine advocate intertwined with accessible, uncomplicated, and non-judgmental religious care, available to everyone.

The importance of community and religious backing to novel vaccinations and public health efforts cannot be understated.

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

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

Acknowledgments/References

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