



The Philadelphia Measles Outbreak

Lessons From the Past

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April 20, 1989



April 20, 1989

- After returning from a trip to Spain, a teenager with a blotchy rash attends an R.E.M. concert at the Spectrum in Philadelphia.
- A couple weeks later, several other teenagers get sick.
- Measles virus has entered the city.

The Philadelphia Inquirer



No Measley Problem

May 21, 1990

Measles

- Measles vaccine first introduced in the United States in 1963.
- Prior to a vaccine, every year measles caused 3 million cases, 48,000 hospitalizations, and 500 deaths. Almost everyone was infected by 15 years of age.
- Deaths caused by pneumonia, encephalitis, or dehydration.

Measles Vaccine

- By 1978, only 27,000 cases of measles reported.
- CDC optimistic that measles could be eliminated from the US—launched the Measles Elimination Program with a goal to eliminate measles by 1982.
- In 1983, only 1,500 cases reported.
- But in 1989, measles came back.

Measles in Philadelphia

- By November 29, 1990, 96 Philadelphia children infected with measles.
- By December 7, increases to 124.
- By December 31, increases to 258.
- In December, 1990, an 18-month old boy dies from measles pneumonia. First measles death in city in 20 years.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

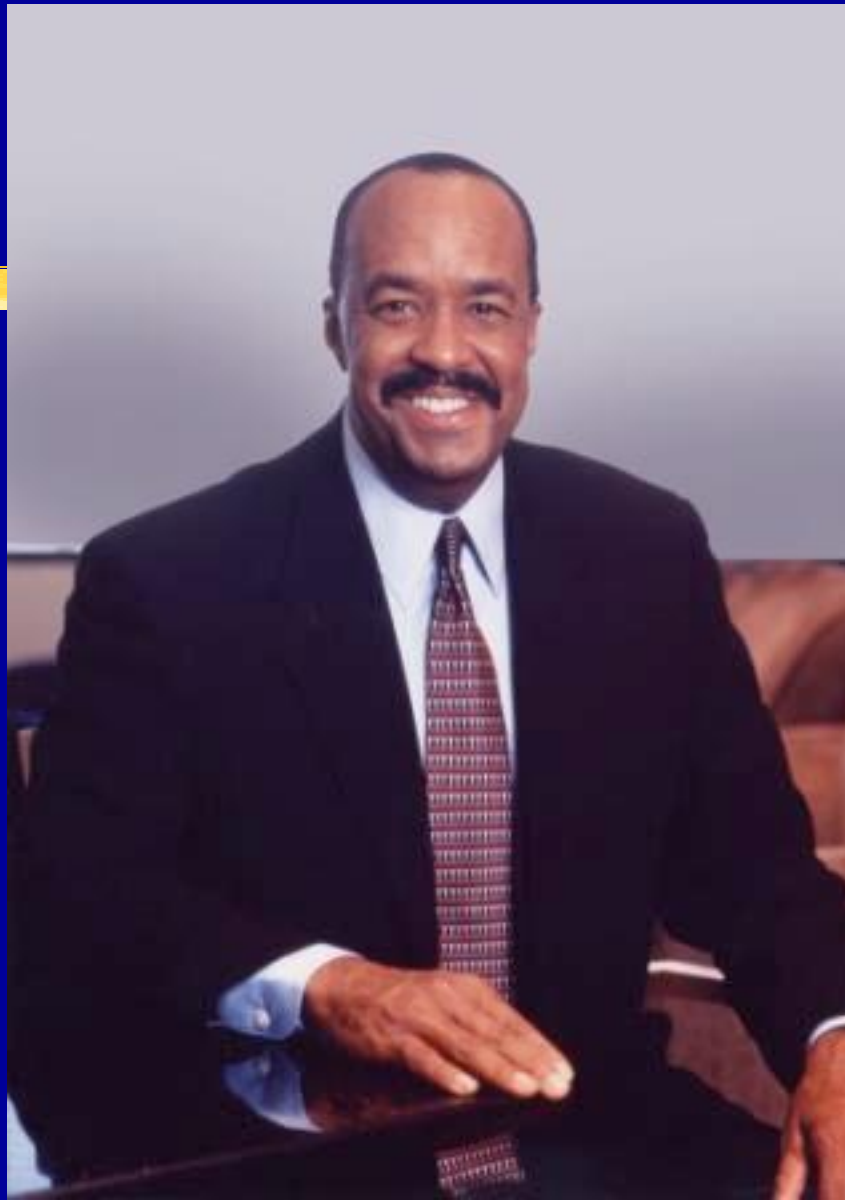


N. Philadelphia Baby Death Linked to Measles

June 12, 1990

Measles in Philadelphia

- Both measles deaths occur in unimmunized children.
- Philadelphia health commissioner recommends that first dose of vaccine should be given at 6 months of age.
- Seven weeks later city health officials will do something that had never been done before or since.



Dr Robert Ross

January 16, 1991

- Ross receives an anonymous phone call from a woman whose daughter belongs to the Faith Tabernacle church in North Philadelphia.
- Woman warns Ross that church members don't believe in medical care.
- “No one had died yet,” said Ross. “But for the first time we worried that we might not hear about a case of measles until a church member calls the police or calls the coroner to pick up the body.”

Faith Tabernacle Church

- Doctrine instructs members to “believe that the Bible is opposed to all means of healing apart from God’s way.”
- “If I go to God and ask him to heal my body,” says church member Gordon Korn, “I can’t go to a doctor for medicine. You either trust God or you trust man.”
- Church school contains hundreds of children—none are immunized.



The Philadelphia Inquirer



Measles Kills Two Church School Pupils

February 11, 1991

Faith Tabernacle Church

- On February 7, 1991, Caryn Still, a 9-year-old girl is pronounced dead from measles; on February 10, Monica Johnson, a classmate, is also pronounced dead; Monica is one of 11 children in the home, all unimmunized.
- Monica's father is a teacher at the school. "I feel very confident in my belief in the way I've raised my children," he says. "Monica is something that God has given us and now has taken away."

Faith Tabernacle Church

- After Caryn Still's death, Ross meets with Reverend Charles Reinert, pastor of Faith Tabernacle.
- “He was soft-spoken, the consummate gentleman,” says Ross. “But he drove us nuts. We told him we needed to vaccinate everyone in the school but he said the families wouldn't let us do it.”

The Philadelphia Inquirer



Checking Measles Cases with a Quick Glance

February 12, 1991

The Philadelphia Courts: Step I

- Ross obtains a court order to visit the families, who refuse to let him touch their children.
- “Most of the families had six, eight, ten, twelve kids because they didn’ t believe in birth control,” says Ross. “There were also a lot of kids who were physically or mentally disabled because they all had in-house deliveries. Even if the kids were born breech, they didn’ t do a C-section. It was like the old days.”

The Philadelphia Courts: Step I

- Ross finds that children appear well: “These kids had the rash, they were lying in bed, but they were alert, conversant, and appeared well hydrated.”
- Ross pleads with the parents to let him know if their children get any sicker.

The Philadelphia Inquirer



Cheltenham Girl, 14, Is Third
Measles Victim

February 15, 1991

Faith Tabernacle Church

- On February 14, police are called to the home of Linette Milnes, who is pronounced dead. Milnes doesn't attend the Faith Tabernacle school, but her sister does. Linette's seven brothers and sisters are all unimmunized.
- “When another kid turned up at the morgue I checked my list and realized she was on it,” said Ross. “I had just called the mother and she told me her kids were fine! She lied to me!”

Faith Tabernacle Church

- Ross refers the case to District Attorney Ron Castille, who considers filing criminal charges, but demurs.
- “Unfortunately, when the parent is willing to risk the death of their children because of religious beliefs,” says Castille, “it’s unlikely that the threat of prosecution will in any way act as a deterrent.”

The Philadelphia Courts: Step II

- Ross realizes that the information he's getting from parents is inaccurate.
- Gets a court order to physically examine children. Enlists residents at CHOP and St. Christopher's Hospital to go door-to-door: "It was one of the more inspiring moments in my thirty years in healthcare," says Ross. "These are busy people, on call every third night, yet they were happy to do it."

PHILADELPHIA

DAILY NEWS

Measles Eyed in Two More Kid's Deaths

February 15, 1991

Fourth Measles Death

- In the early morning of February 15, Nancy Evans, a 5-year-old from North Central Philadelphia, dies from measles. Nancy doesn't belong to the Faith Tabernacle church.

First-Century Gospel Church



Fifth Measles Death

- Also on February 15, Tina Louise Johnson, the 13-year-old sister of Monica Johnson, dies on the day of Monica's funeral.
- Neither Nancy Evans nor Tina Louise Johnson were taken to a doctor when their illnesses worsened.

Philadelphia Measles Epidemic, 1991

- Five children have died in 10 days.
- Philadelphia is in the midst of the worst measles epidemic in the United States.
- In the U.S., about 1 in 1,000 infected children die from measles. In some developing world countries, can reach as high as 1 in 300. In Philadelphia, 4 of 150 children with measles who attend Faith Tabernacle are dead, a rate of about 1 in 35.

February 15, 1991

- CDC sends team to investigate.
- Was the circulating strain more virulent?
- The CDC's Bill Atkinson finds that the measles deaths have nothing to do with the circulating strain and everything to do with the parents. Children are dying because they aren't getting intravenous fluids for severe dehydration or oxygen for pneumonia.

The Philadelphia Inquirer



It's Children Stricken with
Measles, Church Puts Faith
in God's Healing

February 18, 1991

Faith Tabernacle Church

- Charles Reinert speaks out:
- “The Devil has tried to put fear in people’s hearts. Job was robbed of everything he had. As he went through the trial, he learned from it. There is no fear when you can see God on your side.”
- Reinert sees deaths in his church as a test of his faith, a test he has every intention of passing. “It’s drawing us all together,” he says.

The Philadelphia Courts: Step III

- Ross asks mayor to obtain court order to hospitalize children who are critically ill.
- With the telephone number of a judge in hand, residents examine children from Faith Tabernacle church. “It was like entering a time warp,” said Mark Joffe, who headed St. Chris’ s team. “With the exception of the fact that they stay at home and watch their children die from measles, they seem like wonderful people.”

The Philadelphia Inquirer



Phila. Compels Hospitalization in Measles Case

February 18, 1991

Faith Tabernacle Church

- Daniel Kirn, 4-year old, develops measles pneumonia. Healthcare worker insists on admitting child to hospital. Parents “politely, but firmly, refuse.”
- Ross calls City Solicitor Charisse Lille, who calls Family Court Judge Edward Summers, who gets an emergency order to hospitalize the boy.
- A second child, 1-year old Bianca Carpena, is also hospitalized against her parents’ will.

Measles Epidemic

- Philadelphia measles epidemic is at its peak.
- At CHOP, 82 children seen in ED and 28 have been hospitalized.
- At St. Chris' s, 250 children seen in ED and 3 are being hospitalized every week.
- Ross and his team have visited 80 families and 500 children, but predicts, “There will be more measles deaths in the city of Philadelphia.”

PHILADELPHIA


DAILY NEWS

Measles Hysteria Rampant

February 21, 1991

The Philadelphia Courts: Step IV

- Philadelphia is a feared destination. Two nearby schools cancel trips to the city.
- City prints 50,000 educational pamphlets and is vaccinating hundreds of school children every week. PA sends \$100,000 in federal funds to help.
- On February 27, 1991, Mayor Wilson Goode asks the City Solicitor's office to obtain a court order to forcibly vaccinate children.



**According to the Supreme Court's
interpretation of the constitution,
states are permitted to compel
vaccination of their citizens**

United States Supreme Court

- *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* (1905)
 - Outbreak of smallpox in Cambridge
 - Cambridge Board of Health requires smallpox vaccine or \$5.00 fine
 - Henning Jacobson refused both

Justice John Marshall Harlan



United States Supreme Court

“The liberty secured by the Constitution of the United States...does not import an absolute right...to be wholly freed from restraint. There are manifold restraints to which every person is necessarily subject for the common good....Society based on the rule that each one is a law unto himself would soon be confronted with anarchy and disorder.”

United States Supreme Court

- *Zucht v. King* (1922)
 - Rosalyn Zucht was expelled from Brackenridge High School in San Antonio for refusing smallpox vaccine.
 - Unanimous decision granting states broad authority to impose health regulations


United States Supreme Court

⌘ *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944)

- Jehovah's Witness claims right to have young children distribute pamphlets.
- Judge ruled against Prince, claiming religious freedom did not trump child labor laws.

Prince v Massachusetts (1944)

“[A parent] cannot claim freedom from compulsory vaccination for the child any more than for himself on religious grounds. The right to practice religion freely does not include the liberty to expose the community to infectious disease. Parents may be free to become martyrs themselves; but it does not follow they are free...to make martyrs of their children.”



**Although no constitutional right
to refuse vaccines, states may allow
exemptions**

Religious Exemptions: State Courts

- **Wright v. DeWitt High School, 1965**
- **McCartney v. Austin, 1968**
- **Avard v. Manchester Board of School Committee, et al., 1974**
- **Brown v. Stone, 1979**
- **Davis v. Maryland, 1982**

New York State Assembly, 1966



New York State, 1966

- New York State considered a bill requiring polio vaccine for school entry.
- Passed by a vote of 150-2.
- Two dissenting votes because the bill excluded parents whose religion forbade vaccination. Direct result of lobbying efforts of one particular religious group.

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910)



Christian Science

- Born in 1875 with Eddy's publication, *Science and Health*.
- Believed that illness was a spiritual, not a physical disorder. Diseases should be treated with prayer, not medicines or surgeries.
- “We have smallpox because others have it. But mortal mind, not matter contains and carries the infection.”

Maier v. Besser, 1972

- William Maier took advantage of the New York State decision, successfully claiming his First Amendment rights. Can't discriminate against me because I'm not a Christian Scientist.
- 47 states have religious exemptions to vaccination. Pennsylvania is one of them.

Sherr v. Northport Union School, 1987

- Lewis Levy argued: “To us, religion is not a temple; religion is not something outside of ourselves.”
- Judge agreed: Vaccine exemptions granted “if beliefs were held with the strength of religious convictions” even if parents weren’t members of a religious group. 19 states now have philosophical exemptions.

The Philadelphia Inquirer



City Will Seek Court Order
for Measles Shots

February 28, 1991

Florida, 2009, Dove World Outreach Center



2007, Missouri, Westboro Baptist Church



1977, Skokie, IL, Neo-Nazi march



The Philadelphia Inquirer



ACLU Declines to Help Parents in Measles Case

March 2, 1991

ACLU Declines

- “There is certainly a free exercise of religion claim by the parents,” said Deborah Leavy, of the Philadelphia chapter of the ACLU, “but there is also a competing claim that parents don’t have the right to martyr their children. I don’t think we’ve walked away from our principles here.”

The Philadelphia Inquirer



Judge Permits City to
Vaccinate Objectors

March 2, 1991

Faith Tabernacle Church

- Jerome Balter, lawyer for the parents of Faith Tabernacle, protests Summers' decision. "Their healing is dependent on their faith," he says. "They believe that's the right thing to do for their children."
- Judge rules in favor of the city.
- Balter takes case to the Pennsylvania Superior Court of Appeals.

Faith Tabernacle Church

- State Superior Court Judge Vincent Cirillo hears the appeal. Shawn Lacy is the public defender representing the children.
- Cirillo notices a pained expression on Lacy's face. "Are you ill?" he asks. Lacy had just been handed a note concerning a 20-month old boy, James Jones, whose parents are members of Faith Tabernacle.

The Philadelphia Inquirer



Church Child Dies

March 9, 1991

Faith Tabernacle Church

- **Balter argues that parents are now willing to allow sick children to be admitted to the hospital but they still refuse to be vaccinated.**
- **Balter implies that treatment is as good as prevention, a statement contradicted by events of the previous month.**

PHILADELPHIA

DAILY NEWS

Five Children Get Court Ordered Vaccinations

March 9, 1991

The Philadelphia Inquirer



Measles Epidemic Slows

June 7, 1991

Measles Epidemic

- “Typically, measles is a disease of the late winter and early spring,” says Robert Levenson, director of disease control. “When the warm weather comes, the cases disappear.”
- Reinert has a different interpretation. Focusing on the children in his church who had survived the infection without medical care, he said, “We believe God has provided his faithfulness.”

December 3, 1992

- Among church members, 486 people infected and six died. Among non-church members, 938 people infected and three died.
- All nine deaths were in children. Attack rate in church members about 1,000-fold greater than in the surrounding community.

D. V. Rodgers, et al, “High Attack Rates and Case Fatality During a Measles Outbreak in Groups with Religious Exemption to Vaccination,”
Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal 12 (1993): 288-92

CDC, 2013

- In 2013, CDC identifies about 30,000 children whose parents had chosen not to vaccinate them for religious reasons.
- Given underreporting and the insular nature of some faith healing groups, the number is likely much larger.

CDC: “Vaccination Coverage Among Children in Kindergarten—United States, 2012-2013 School Year,” MMWR 62 (2013): 607-612.

“Jesus was my doctor”

- **Children in society at the time of Jesus’ birth.**
- **Quotes attributed to Jesus in the gospels.**
- **Constantine, first Christian emperor of Rome, and edicts of 315 and 321 AD**
- **Early monasteries and missionaries**
- **Where were religious leaders during the Philadelphia measles epidemic?**

Concluding Question

**Why do we allow such a profoundly
unreligious act to be performed in
the name of religion?**

**God chose you
to protect his
children!**

