Lessons for the Covid Vaccination Program

From the Past

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, David Oshinsky described the huge efforts and struggles Americans experienced as they sought to invent and then administer a polio vaccine. This experience, while occurring decades ago, offers some lessons in today's struggle to eradicate the coronavirus.

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As Oshinsky tells the story, polio was a very rare disease until the early 1900s. He claims that people lived in relatively unsanitary conditions, which were breeding grounds for many diseases. In such an environment, children often caught polio when they were infants and still breast feeding. Luckily, most of these infants received enough protection from the antibodies in their mother's milk that they only rarely caught a severe case of polio. Then, America began to wage a war on germs. Antibiotics were invented that cured many bacterial infections. But the war wasn't only waged by scientists. American households started to use household cleaners at unprecedented levels, making their homes more sanitary than they had ever been. In some ways, this war on germs was enormously successful: In the first half of the 1900s, the average life expectancy in the U.S. increase by 20 years. But there was a drawback: In their clean homes, many children no longer were exposed to polio when they were still breast feeding. They contracted it later in their childhoods, when they could no longer count on their mothers' antibodies to protect them.

Polio was a disease that afflicted the children of middle class and rich households much more frequently than it afflicted the children from poor households. The reason was simple. In the richer households, the parents put more effort into making their homes sanitary. This caused their children to be exposed to polio later in life, when they were more vulnerable. In the poorer, less sanitary households, many of the children got polio so early in life that they still benefited from the protection offered by breast feeding.

Once the vaccine was available in the mid-1950s, the story changed. Most parents from middle- and upper-class families got their children vaccinated; parents from poor families often did not. As a result, polio became much more prevalent in poorer communities. The government faced a challenge in convincing these parents to get their children vaccinated. History is repeating itself. People in middle- and upper-class households are choosing to get the COVID vaccine when they are eligible to do so. People in poorer neighborhoods are often not getting their COVID shots.

When a group of people does not get vaccinated, it hurts the whole country. It makes it less likely the country will reach herd immunity – because enough people will remain unvaccinated that the virus can survive. It also makes it more likely that new variants will emerge that are resistant to the existing vaccines. Remember, new variants can only emerge when the virus is replicating. If vaccines prevent the virus from being transmitted, a new modified version of the virus will never be created.

Since our country's experience with polio teaches us that poorer people will be reluctant to get vaccinated, we should adopt policies to lessen the problems this will cause. The government should start holding weekly mass inoculation events in poor communities that are open to everyone who lives in the area. The government should administer the Johnson and Johnson vaccine at these events since this vaccine only requires one shot. There is no sense offering a two-shot regime to a group of people who may be reluctant to come back for a second shot.

Making vaccine shots immediately available to people in poorer communities has several advantages. These mass inoculation events will not require people to plan ahead. They can just show up and get a shot. When their cost of getting inoculated (in time and planning effort) is reduced, these people will become more likely to get vaccinated. Second, once people in these communities see that vaccines offer their neighbors protection from the virus and that they do no harm, more people in these poor neighborhoods will be willing to get vaccinated.