The Practice of Smallpox Inoculation in Colonial Boston and the Response from the Medical and Religious Communities in the Colonies and Britain, 1721-30

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Disclosures

S.M. Richart: None.

Abstract

Centuries prior to Jenner’s cowpox vaccination, the Chinese practiced inoculation of smallpox material on healthy people as a means of preventing smallpox disease. As this practice spread to India, Turkey, and parts of Africa, it came to the attention of the European world in the early 18th century. Enlisting the aid of local Boston physician Zebediah Boylston, famous Puritan minister Cotton Mather championed the implementation of the smallpox inoculation following an epidemic in Boston starting in 1721 that resulted in about 50% of the city’s inhabitants developing smallpox disease. Boylston’s practice of inoculation sparked an intense public debate that played out from the newspapers to the pulpit. While ultimately a compelling pragmatic argument arose in support of inoculation when data showed lowered smallpox death rates in people who had been inoculated, many other ethical considerations and concerns were raised within both the medical and religious communities before inoculation became more widely embraced. Here, using primary documents from Boston and Britain written between 1721-30, we examine some of the major ethical concerns to inoculation raised during this pivotal time period. While many of these concerns illustrate a pre-Germ theory conception of disease, some are recognizable in the current vaccination debate.