

Smallpox in Glasgow, 1871-1948: Opposition to Vaccination, Public Perception and Local Health Interventions

Background:

In light of the ongoing pandemic, with its own resurgence and anti-vaccination activity, this research investigated similar occurrences in the past with a specific focus on Glasgow given its history for public health interventions and smallpox epidemics. England's history with anti-vaccination is also well-documented in comparison to Scotland which has had little coverage in this area.

Why Glasgow?

Report on vaccination and its results based on the evidence taken by the Commission during the years 1889-1897:

“During the last half-century probably no large town has witnessed so great a change in its sanitary condition as Glasgow... so late as 1842 the condition of its population was reported... to be the worst... seen in any part of Great Britain. Typhus and smallpox epidemics devastated the city.”

Aim:

To study principal outbreaks of smallpox in Glasgow, focusing on how local authorities dealt with opposition to vaccination and protected Glasgow's population.

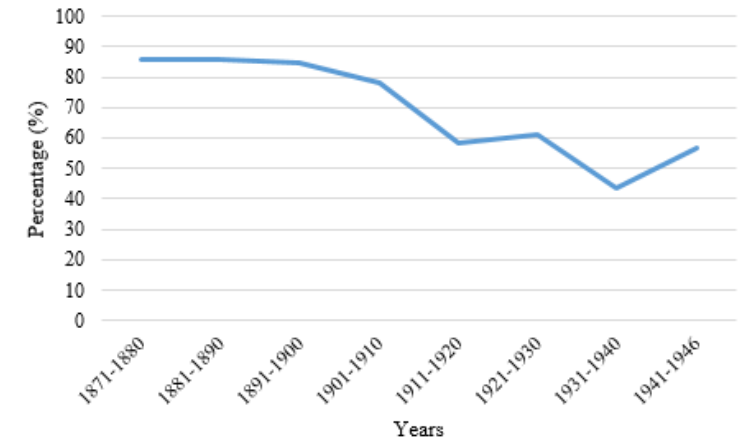
Research Questions:

- What was the extent of opposition to vaccination in Glasgow?
- Was the 1907 amendment to compulsory vaccination a key factor in declining vaccinations?
- What was the effectiveness of local public health interventions?
- How were these interventions received by the public?

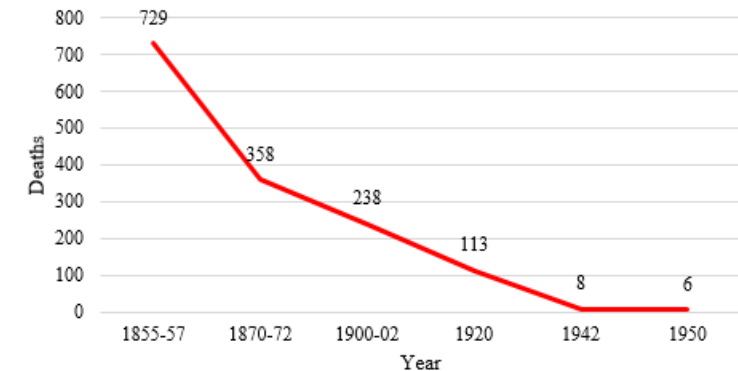
Methodology:

Utilise both qualitative and quantitative sources to attempt to explain rises and dips in vaccination in relation to smallpox outbreaks. Figures from medical reports to establish concentration of outbreaks and vaccinations, supplemented with newspaper articles and official documents to understand local sentiment and difficulties to vaccination.

Glasgow Vaccinated Population



Glasgow Smallpox Deaths in Principal Outbreaks



EVIL EFFECTS OF VACCINATION.

The Parliamentary Committee on the Vaccination Act sat again on Friday; Mr Hibbert in the chair.—The Rev. William Hume-Rothery, of Middleton, said that about four years ago he had a child vaccinated, and it suffered directly afterwards from the effects. He then came to the conclusion that vaccination was a mistake, and he made inquiry and discovered a number of instances of the ill effects of it. These cases he

North British Daily Mail,
27th March 1871

Daily Record,
21st February, 1905

Smallpox will visit us periodically until we adopt methods of thorough sanitation, instead of poisoning the blood by vaccination. I may state that ere long many of Glasgow's citizens will appear before the Sheriff to object and refuse to allow this filthy operation to be performed on their children.

NO MORE VACCINATION!
A PUBLIC MEETING will be held in the Assembly Rooms, Crown Street, S.S., To-Morrow Evening (Wednesday), 19th April, 1876, for the purpose of hearing an ADDRESS on the EVILS of VACCINATION, and the TRUE REMEDIES for SMALL-POX, by

HENRY PITMAN
(Of Manchester).
Admission Free. Hour of Meeting, 8 o'clock.

Glasgow Herald,
18th April, 1876

Forward (Glasgow),
19th June 1920

THE SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC

VACCINATION Versus SANITATION

Charges by Anti-Vaccination League—Dr. Chalmers Replies

ANTI-VACCINATOR SENT TO JAIL.

Daily Record,
28th March 1902

SANITATION V. VACCINATION.

Forward
(Glasgow),
19th June 1920

What was opposition like?

Opposition to vaccination was varied. Some people weren't opposed to the practice of vaccination, but advocated for further public health reform in its stead. Others were against the notion that the government should force the vaccine upon their children and that they as parents were fined for refusing to vaccinate their children. There were those who believed that the vaccine actually killed more people than it saved, a regular opinion in newspaper coverage throughout the peak outbreaks.

Anti-vaccination groups often advertised their material in their letters to editors and would regularly engage in discourse with those opposed to their views for multiple editions.

Daily Record,
6th July 1942

**MORE PEOPLE MUST
BE VACCINATED**

CORPORATION OF GLASGOW
PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

SMALLPOX

Opening of Public Vaccination Centres

Owing to the presence of cases of smallpox in the city the public are strongly advised by the Medical Officer of Health to protect themselves by vaccination. The following public centres will be opened for free vaccination as from Wednesday, 1st July.

HOURS - - - 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Newlands School, 871 Springfield Road, E.1
Sacred Heart Junior Secondary School, Pirn Street, S.E.
St. Mary's (Girls and Infants), Forbes Street, S.E.
Wellpark School, 120 Sydney Street, E.1
Dennistoun School, 36 Meadowpark Street, E.1
Carnegie School, Liberton Street, E.1 (enter by Warriston Cres.)
St. Rollox School, 102 Garngad Road, N.
Petershill School, 33 Petershill Road, N. (enter by Midton St.)
Elmvale School, Hawthorn Street, N.
City Public Senior Secondary School, St. James's Road, C.4
Kent Road School, 210 Kent Road, C.3 (enter by Berkeley St.)
High School for Girls, Buccleuch Street, C.3
Dobbie's Loan School, Dunblane Street, Dobbie's Loan, C.4
St. George's Rd. Jun. Secondary School, 374 St. George's Rd., C.3
Possil Senior Secondary School, 426 Balmore Road, N.
Shakespeare School, Shakespeare Street, N.
Dowanhill School, Havelock Street, W.1
Balshagray School, Broomhill Avenue, W.1
Camden Street School, Florence Street, C.5
Gorbals School, 40 Oxford Street, C.5
Crookston St. School, Carnoustie St., C.5 (enter by Wallace St.)
Bellahouston Sen. Secondary School, 425 Paisley Rd. W., S.W.1
Copland Road School, Copland Rd., S.W.1 (enter by Copland Rd.)
Calder Street Junior Secondary School, 316 Calder Street, S.2
Knightswood School, Knightswood Road, W.3

Daily Record,
1st July, 1942,

Sunday Post,
12th July 1942

Vaccination In Factories

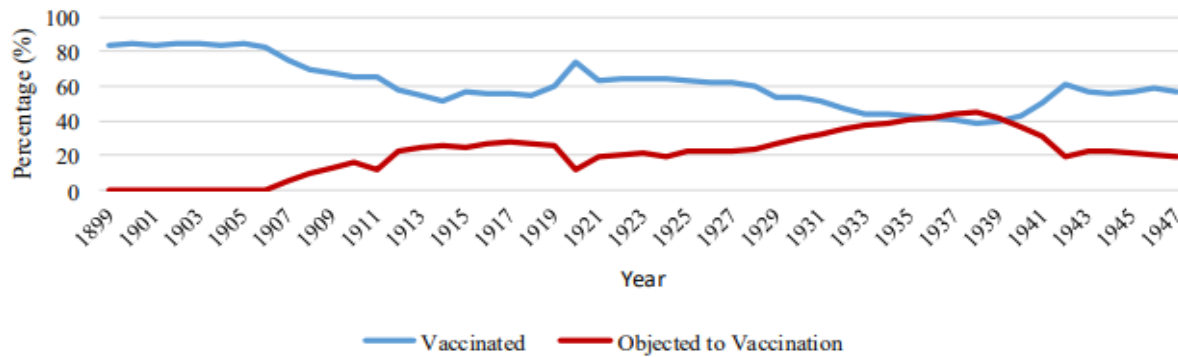
IN the present smallpox scare, good work is certainly being done in Glasgow and surrounding districts in the matter of vaccination.

Why not have the managements of factories and workshops organise vaccination of their workers?

I'm sure medical authorities would greatly appreciate the plan. Workers, although taken from their job for a minute or two, would be doing a war job by helping to fight this deadly disease.—V.

[This is being done in many cases.]

Primary Vaccination of Children in Glasgow



Whilst opposition to vaccination found itself expressed freely in the newspapers, it was always in the minority as swathes of pro-vaccination responses were often featured in subsequent editions. Most anti-vaccination sentiment was confined to the editor's letters section, with most publications promoting the material of the Corporation of Glasgow Public Health Department's officials as they reported on the principal outbreaks.

Despite the majority of material taking a neutral or pro-vaccination standpoint numerous health officials warned that complacency to vaccination would result in large swathes of Glasgow being unprotected from subsequent outbreaks. This sentiment is present with the 1907 amendment to compulsory vaccination and appears as primary vaccinations begin to fall off after an outbreak has ended.



Queues outside Public Health Department in Glasgow, 1950.

By the 1942 outbreak in Glasgow, opposition to smallpox vaccination appears to have petered out in comparison with previous outbreaks, indeed, the local authorities were under pressure for not having acted soon enough to protect the population, a stark contrast from the thorough vaccination campaigns organised for the previous outbreaks.



Still from *British Pathé* newsreel, Glasgow, 1950.

Findings and Results:

Conscientious objection rises after an epidemic before sharply falling again once the next outbreak. The rise from 1920-1 until 1942 for example, with peak objection in 1938-9. Reasons for objection are varied in nature and diverse in their intention, some feared harmful side affects, others argued for other public health interventions, and many were concerned for their jobs if they were or were not vaccinated.

Conclusions:

- Opposition to vaccination in Glasgow appeared to be more out of complacency than of ignorance. The public appear to be less willing to be vaccinated in contrast with newspaper coverage, especially during the 1930s.
- Opposition to vaccination was diverse in origin and expressed for several reasons, such as championing better public health, suspicion of the health authorities, concern over employment and fear of side effects. Pro-vaccination material far outnumbered the opposition in the press.

Future Research:

The scope for future research regarding both smallpox and Glasgow is large. Medical Officer of Health reports for Glasgow contain a wealth of information regarding other public health issues. Investigation into incidents of smallpox opposition in other cities such as Dundee, Edinburgh and other areas could provide interesting results as to how the movement differed on a national scale.