

America's vaccination history

Roosevelt, Cutter, and the Paralyzed Children of Idaho

The vaccine success story in America also has a dark chapter. It continues to work to this day - and makes the fight against the corona virus more difficult.

From WINAND VON PETERSDORFF, WASHINGTON



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Polio vaccination by Jonas Salk in 1954

The history of vaccination in the United States is overshadowed by an incident that almost made the development of vaccines to finish off: the cutter incidental. A sick president, ingenious researchers, and a celebrity lawyer play a role in the following narrative, but above all paralyzed children and the pharmaceutical company Cutter. The incident took place a long time ago, but it still has an impact today and is remembered as the FDA is about to release two vaccines against Corona (Covid-19).

In 1921, the rising politician Franklin Delano Roosevelt could no longer move his legs a few days after falling into the cold Atlantic waters on a sailing trip. He was infected with the poliovirus, it turned out. Polio, or polio, was a disease little known about, except that it killed several thousand Americans each year and left tens of thousands paralyzed. In the summer of 1916, 2,000 people died of the disease in one of the worst outbreaks in New York alone.

58,000 polio cases in 1952

Up until the development of an effective vaccine in the mid-1950s, parents were constantly afraid that their children might develop polio, especially in the summer until the first frost.

The research went slowly. Roosevelt, now president, bought Warm Springs, Georgia. He had promised himself healing from the warm baths, but only found relief from his suffering. Nevertheless, he expanded the spa into a facility for polio victims. When Roosevelt's birthday was celebrated with charity balls across the country in 1934, he asked that the proceeds be donated to the spa. The success of the fundraiser gave Roosevelt an opportunity to reserve some of the money for polio research. An action called "March of Dimes", in which celebrities like Eddie Cantor, Bing Crosby and Zsa Zsa Gabor called for donations through radio spots, raised huge sums of money for the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, which Roosevelt has now established. The Groschen campaign was successful: No government or organization donated more money to the fight against polio than Roosevelt's Foundation.

The money had an effect: at the end of the 1940s, breakthroughs were made in the development of a polio vaccine. Researchers were able to identify three different strains of the virus and cultivate the viruses. Two methods were in competition. As head of the Roosevelt Foundation's vaccination program, Jonas Salk had developed and refined active immunization using dead viruses that were injected. His opponent Albert Sabin, on the other hand, propagated the administration of weakened viruses, which were taken in the form of oral vaccinations.

First, Salk should prevail. 1952 was a bad year. 58,000 Americans contracted polio and 3,000 died. The public longed for relief. Salk found the gift of living viruses too dangerous. He insisted on killing the viruses with formalin and then injecting them. After successful animal testing, he tested the vaccine on children in mental hospitals and eventually on himself and his family. Rumors of a successful vaccine development had now spread. Salk turned to the public on the radio to report on the state of affairs. He became one of the most famous personalities in the country in one fell swoop. His relativization and admonition to be patient were deliberately ignored, the public longed for a vaccine.

1954 began a large-scale experiment with 1.3 million children: They were given either the vaccine or a placebo. In December 1955, the results were announced at a press conference that was broadcast in cinemas across the country and followed by more than 50,000 invited doctors. The announced result: The vaccine was 80 to 90 percent effective.

Celebrated by magazines as the "King of Compensation"

On the same day, the government licensed five American companies to produce the Salk vaccine. The then health minister had given the approval body almost three hours to work through 2000 pages of data and, on this basis, to make a decision as to which companies should produce the vaccine. The family business Cutter got hold of one of the production licenses. With that the misfortune took its course. A few weeks after the spectacular press conference, doctors and local health authorities in Idaho and California reported cases of vaccinated children showing signs of paralysis, especially on the arm. It later emerged that Cutter had failed to completely kill the viruses. An investigation led to the conclusion that in around 40.000 doses of viruses of the particularly aggressive Mahoney strain survived. 51 children were paralyzed and five died. Infected by vaccination, other people were infected. 220,000 people were infected. The vaccination had done more harm than the poliovirus itself.

The Roosevelt Foundation was in an uproar. She had ceded the vaccination program to the government, whose health oversight was inexperienced in approving vaccines. The requirements for the producers were also weaker than the requirements of Jonas Salk, the father of vaccination. A government investigation revealed that all manufacturers had difficulties reliably killing the virus. But only at one other Wyeth company did this lead to illnesses and individual deaths. The chief health inspector stopped the vaccination program in 1955 and implemented improvements. Between 1956 and 1961, 400 million vaccinations were given without any problems. Salty's vaccination was later replaced by Sabin's oral vaccination. Here the story could have come to a somewhat conciliatory end.

But Robert Gottesdanker, father of Anna, who was paralyzed by the vaccination, hired a lawyer: Melvin Belli, hailed by magazines as the "King of Compensation". He had celebrities like the Rolling Stones, Muhammad Ali or Erol Flynn defended. In one spectacular case, he successfully sued Coca-Cola on behalf of a waitress. She had been injured by an exploding Coke bottle. Belli reached a verdict in the case of Gottesdanker v. Cutter, which not only made claims for damages a major line of business, but also shaped the future of the pharmaceutical industry for 50 years. Cutter was expressly acquitted of the allegation of having acted negligently in the production of the vaccine. But Belli used the legal theory already applied in the Coca-Cola case that there is an implicit guarantee in every product sold that the users of the product will not be harmed. In other words: companies are also liable if they are not to blame for defects in a product sold. The case ended before the Supreme Court, which found the plaintiffs right. Pharmaceutical companies and medical professionals warned that the decision would paralyze industry and research. But the idea that the damages were covered by insurance, for which the contributions were added to the selling price of the vaccines, somehow calmed the mind.

Government program to dramatically accelerate vaccine development

Then in 1974 an article by researchers appeared that vaccination against whooping cough causes brain damage. The manufacturers were sued in America. Three out of four manufacturers of the vaccine withdrew from production. They shied away from the legal effort. Extensive studies later made it clear that the vaccine was not responsible for the brain damage. Glaxo Smith Kline said goodbye to the production of a vaccine against the tick disease Lyme disease following mass lawsuits. The problem was that plaintiff-friendly jury juries would award damages even when it was scientifically proven that drugs or products were not responsible for the harm suffered.

For pharmaceutical companies it became more and more obvious: Developing and producing vaccines can hardly be justified in business terms. Even after Congress changed the rules on damages for pharmaceutical companies, the risk of litigation remained high. Then there was the commercial dilemma: the better the vaccine, the less often it had to be refreshed. Between 1998 and 2004, according to America's top vaccination educator Paul Offit, urgently recommended vaccines for eight major infectious diseases were inadequate. Offit, professor of vaccination research in Philadelphia and developer of a rotavirus vaccine, recalled the momentous case a few years ago in his bestseller "The Cutter-Incident".

Today, it is not without concern that he is looking at "Warp Speed", the multi-billion dollar government program to dramatically accelerate the development of vaccines and therapies

against Covid-19. For Harvard researcher Nathaniel Moir, Warp Speed is a risky attempt to make up for past sins of omission in strengthening the vaccine industry. He points out the danger that because of the rapidly accelerated development and attempts to exert political influence on the approval of Covid drugs, many people could refuse the vaccination. Paul Offit confirmed attempts by the White House to grant special permits for hydroxychloroquine and treatment with blood plasma, which in each case proved to be unsuccessful and in individual cases even harmful. However, according to Offit, FDA chief Stephen Hahn ended up showing stature when he turned down early approval of vaccines. Offit, himself a member of an FDA vaccine advisory board, would be vaccinated. He sees the development of Covid vaccines as a success that nobody thought was conceivable. However, the clarification of liability issues apparently also plays a role. The big corporations are taking part because they were guaranteed in the purchase agreements with governments that they would not have to be held liable for any damage. However, the clarification of liability issues apparently also plays a role. The big corporations are taking part because they were guaranteed in the purchase agreements with governments that they would not have to be held liable for any damage. However, the clarification of liability issues apparently also plays a role. The big corporations are taking part because they were guaranteed in the purchase agreements with governments that they would not have to be held liable for any damage.

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