

Remembering *The Polio Crusade*

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It is not often that we get to see an intricate behind-the-scenes account of the human drama fueling a medical breakthrough. *The Polio Crusade*, a documentary film written, produced and directed by Sara Colt for PBS's "American Experience," based in part on the Pulitzer prize-winning book *Polio: An American Story* by David Oshinsky tells of the tireless efforts of researchers, advocates and fundraisers to find a vaccine for poliomyelitis.

To further elucidate the enduring lessons of *The Polio Crusade* for our modern times, David Oshinsky, Sara Colt, David Rose (archivist for the March of Dimes) and Larry Becker (board member of PHI) share their insights.

A Personal Crusade

What first emerges in screening *The Polio Crusade* is that this crusade was a strikingly personal one. "The great challenge was to take people to the place of fear and contagion; that the polio epidemic changed the way people lived their lives at the time," Colt stated.

The sense of the personal became even more dramatic when polio, considered primarily a childhood illness, affected a most unlikely adult, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, at age 39 in the summer of 1921. FDR transformed his personal pain into an unwavering passion to serve the needs of polio patients.

As the film illustrates, the personal nature of the Crusade was deepened by the entrance of Basil O'Connor, FDR's close friend and law partner. Basil O'Connor was not a self-chosen crusader, but his fierce loyalty to FDR fueled him to take the crusade to the next level. In 1938, O'Connor was appointed the first president of the

National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, founded by FDR, known today as the March of Dimes.

The Polio Vaccine: Building-Block Science

In the book, Oshinsky documents that the achievement of the polio vaccine, despite focus on its central celebrity figure Jonas Salk, is the result of numerous building-block steps of scientists that came before Salk. These include the research team of Enders, Weller and Robbins (1948); they received the Nobel Prize in 1954. Yet the fierce debate between Salk, who favored the killed-virus vaccine, and Sabin, who advocated for a live-virus vaccine, remains the central narrative thread of the race for a vaccine. Salk, who was favored by Basil O'Connor, was granted the go-ahead for a vaccine field trial, which in 1954 was administered to over two million children in 44 states.

The road to a vaccine for polio was not without its controversies. Previous to the trials of 1954, Salk tested his vaccine on children in institutions for the "crippled" and the "feebleminded." The vaccine was tested at a time when there was no such thing as informed

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Polio survivor Reji Mathew attended the premiere screening of *The Polio Crusade* in New York, resulting in an analysis of the film based on interviews with the principals. Here is an abbreviated version. To savor the longer version with additional insightful comments, go to PHI's website, www.post-polio.org/edu/pphnews/PPH25-2sp09polcrusex.pdf. Members may contact PHI for a copy.

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consent as we know it today. Another setback was the haste to reproduce the vaccine. The National Foundation contracted with several drug companies, notably Cutter Pharmaceuticals, to manufacture the vaccine. What resulted was the distribution of a contaminated batch of the polio vaccine that led to several cases of paralysis and death. “It was a time of risk and reward outweighing the risk of getting harmed,” Oshinsky stated.

The Role of the March of Dimes

The Polio Crusade also deserves a subtitle, *The March of Dimes Crusade*, as it is also a remarkable case study of how a nonprofit organization stood at the forefront, organizing a multi-level effort to conquer the disease, more specifically, the cultural beginnings of public philanthropy.

Additionally, as portrayed in the film, O’Connor’s approach was to seek donations from the public rather than from established philanthropists, asking every American to contribute what small change they could, “even as small as a dime.” Hundreds of nameless, faceless Americans contributed to the cause. “The people who contributed felt it was their vaccine; they were invested in the outcome,” Colt stated. David Rose also notes the pioneering strategies of the March of Dimes – engaging celebrities, broadcasting public health announcements, and hosting fundraising events – are now commonplace in today’s health advocacy culture.

Both the book and the film do fall short in not fully exploring the issue of race, as the polio crusade took place in the context of a segregated America. March of Dimes history reveals forgotten heroes such as Charles Bynum, a civil rights activist who served as the

Director of Interracial Relations for the March of Dimes, worked tirelessly on outreach and fundraising initiatives to offer equal representation in care for African-Americans.

Polio Pioneers and Polio Survivors

Sarah Colt tells two parallel stories of polio. First, she depicts the polio vaccine pioneers, with endearing footage of children wincing, smiling and braving first doses of the polio vaccine. She then provides an account of the children and adults who contracted polio.

For example, Colt tells the story of Annie Crockett-Stark’s brother, who contracted polio in Wytheville, Virginia. Crockett-Stark described in compelling detail, how her parents took everything of her brother’s belongings – his entire identity – and “burned it in the front lawn.” Colt’s efforts to tell these stories raise awareness of the countless American families that were shaped for a lifetime by the lasting effects of polio.

The personal story of Larry Becker is a central one. “Remembering polio history is the first necessary step in re-establishing our social context. Unless people remember, it’s not going to be easy to enlist them in the aftermath – post-polio,” Becker stated.

Polio survivors may have a myriad of feelings about this aspect of polio history, but the narrative of *The Polio Crusade* is not simply a story about polio. It is a story of how scientific advances reach people. Millions of people in the United States are waiting for cures, interventions and advances from science. The lingering lesson of *The Polio Crusade* is that for any other disease community to achieve a similar outcome, they will require no less than the same charismatic, integrated effort. ▲

Resources

Polio: An American Story, David M. Oshinsky

Images of America, March of Dimes, David W. Rose

The Polio Crusade, “The American Experience,” PBS