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African Medicine in the New World

Cotton Mather on Smallpox Inoculation (1716)

An Account of the Method and Success of Inoculating the Small-Pox in Boston (1722)

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Smallpox was one of the most common, virulent, and feared diseases of the eighteenth century in America as in Europe, striking down large numbers of Native Americans as well as colonists. During the New England epidemic of 1721, the Puritan preacher and colonial leader Cotton Mather attempted to convince the colony that people should be deliberately inoculated against the disease. It was a technique that he had learned in 1705 from Onesimus, whom he called “my Negro-man.” In this letter to a friend in England, Mather described how he had found out about the procedure.

All that I shall now add, will be my Thanks to you, for communicating to the Public in Dr *Halley's* Transactions, ye Account which you had from Dr *Timonius*, at *Constantinople*, ye Method of obtaining and procuring ye *Small-Pox*, by *Insition*; which I perceive also by some in my Neighbourhood lately come from thence, has been for some time successfully practised there. I am willing to confirm you, in a favourable Opinion, of Dr *Timonius's* Communication; And therefore, I do assure you, that many months before I met with any Intimations of treating ye *Small-Pox*, with ye Method of Inoculation, any where in *Europe*; I had from a Servant of my own, an Account of its being practised in *Africa*. Enquiring of my Negro-man *Onesimus*, who is a pretty Intelligent Fellow, Whether he ever had ye *Small-Pox*; he answered, both, *Yes*, and, *No*; and then told me, that he had undergone an Operation, which had given him something of ye *Small-Pox*, & would forever præserve him from it; adding, That it was often used among ye *Guramantese*, & whoever had ye Courage to use it, was forever free from ye fear of the Contagion. He described ye Operation to me, and shew'd me in his Arm ye Scar, which it had left upon him; and his Description of it, made it the same, that afterwards I found related unto you by your *Timonius*.

This cannot but expire, in a Wonder, and in a request, unto my Dr *Woodward*. How does it come to pass, that no more is done to bring this operation, into experiment & into Fashion—in *England*? When there are so many Thousands of People, that would give many Thousands of Pounds, to have ye Danger and Horror of this frightful Disease well over with you. I beseech you, syr, to move in, and save more Lives than Dr *Sydenham*. For my own part, if I should live to see ye *Small-Pox* again enter into our City, I would immediately procure a Consult of our Physicians, to Introduce a Practice, which may be of so very happy a Tendency. But could we hear, that you have done it before us, how much would That embolden us!

Reprinted from: Letter to John Woodward, from George Lyman Kittredge's introduction to Increase Mather, “Several Reasons Proving That Inoculating or Transplanting the Small Pox, Is a Lawful Practice . . .” (1721).

An Account of the Method and Success of Inoculating the Small-Pox in Boston (1722)

The next year a letter from an American to his friend in England added information on the background of the inoculation procedure.

Sir,

Gentleman well known in the City of *Boston*, had a *Garamantee* Servant, who first gave him an Account, of a Method frequently used in *Africa*, and which had been practis'd on himself, to procure an *easy Small-Pox*, and a perpetual security of neither *dying* by it, nor being again infected with it.

Afterwards he successively met with a Number of *Africans*; who all, in *their* plain Way, without any Combination, or Correspondence, agreed in *one Story*, viz. that in their Country (where they use to die like *Rotten Sheep*, when the *Small-Pox* gets among them) it is now become a *common Thing* to cut a Place or two in their Skin, sometimes one Place, and sometimes another, and put in a little of the Matter of the *Small-Pox*; after which, they, in a few Days, grow a *little Sick*, and a few *Small-Pox* break out, and by-and by they dry away; and that no Body ever dy'd of doing this, nor ever had the *Small-Pox* after it: Which last Point is confirm'd by their constant Attendance on the Sick in our Families, without receiving the Infection; and, so considerable is the Number of these in our Neighbourhood, that he had as evident Proof of the *Practice*, *Safety*, and *Success* of this Operation, as we have that there are *Lions* in *Africa*.

After this, he heard it affirmed, That it is no unusual Thing for our Ships on the Coast of *Guinea*, when they ship their Slaves, to find out by Enquiry which of the Slaves have not yet had the *Small-Pox*; and so carry them a-shore, in this Way to give it to them, that the poor Creatures may sell for a better Price; where they are often (inhumanly enough) to be dispos'd of.

Some Years after he had receiv'd his first *African* Informations, he found publish'd in our *Philosophical Transactions*, divers Communications from the *Levant*, which, to our Surprise, agreed with what he had from *Africa*.

First, That very valuable Person, Dr. *Emancel Timonius*, writes from *Constantinople*, in *December* 1713, That the Practice of procuring the *Small-Pox*, by a Sort of *Inoculation*, had been introduc'd among the *Constantinopolitans*, from the more Eastern and Northern *Asiaticks*, for about forty Years. At the first (he says) People were cautious and afraid; but the *happy Success* on Thousands of Persons, for (then) eight Years past, had put it *out of all Suspicion*. His Account is, That they who have this *Inoculation* practis'd upon them, are subject to very *slight Smptoms*, and sensible of but very little Sickness; nor do what *Small Pox* they have ever leave any *Scars* or *Pits* behind them.

Reprinted from: *An Account of the Method and Success of Inoculating the Small-Pox in Boston, in New-England, in a Letter from a Gentleman There, to His Friend in London* (1722).