

Reji Mathew, Ph.D.  
New York University

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### Remembering *The Polio Crusade*

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, is based in part on the Pulitzer prize-winning book *Polio: An American Story* by David Oshinsky. It tells the remarkable story 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.

"It was a great moment in American history of scientific achievement and volunteerism," Oshinsky stated. A guiding question for both the book and film is, "How did this take place?" he added.

#### *A Personal Crusade*

What first emerges in screening *The Polio Crusade* is that this crusade was a strikingly personal one. Colt recreates the emotional climate of the polio epidemic by showcasing stories of people who were able to recall moments in their disrupted childhoods: the shutting down of public swimming pools, movie theaters, and designated quarantine zones creating barriers to the daily routines of childhood freedom.

Parents were panicked. They heard stories of children being paralyzed or restricted to an iron lung, and polio patients started out-numbering the facilities that could provide treatment; it was a time of uncertainty and helplessness. "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 contracted poliomyelitis. He never regained the use of his legs, but his personal pain was transformed into an unwavering passion to serve the needs of polio patients and to fund research for a cure.

David Rose, devoted archivist at the March of Dimes, notes in his book, *Images of America, March of Dimes* that FDR's commitment to polio led him to spearhead the creation of three organizations focused on polio advocacy. The first was the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation established in 1927, a rehabilitation center for polio survivors; the second was a committee for the celebration of the president's birthday, launched in 1934 to raise money to fund polio patient care; and the third was the President's Birthday Ball Commission for Infantile Paralysis Research, which awarded funds raised by the balls to medical research.

The personal nature of the Crusade was deepened by the next turning point, 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 gave him the fervor to catapult the crusade to the next level. In 1938, O'Connor was appointed the first president of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, consolidating the three preceding organizations founded by FDR, known today as the March of Dimes.

### *The Polio Vaccine: Building-Block Science*

In the book, Oshinsky makes great efforts to document 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) who discovered that the polio virus could be grown in test tube cultures of non-nerve animal tissue. They received the Nobel Prize in 1954. Another important contributor was Isabel Morgan (1949), the first researcher who successfully tested a killed-virus polio vaccine on monkeys. 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 in the race for a vaccine. Their bitter feud went on for decades. Although both formulas were later discovered to be effective and are currently used today throughout the world, 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 2 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 "feble-minded." The vaccine was tested at a time when there was no such thing as informed consent as we know it today. Viewers will mostly likely cringe when learning of this, as it breaches today's accepted ethical standards for research. 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.

Despite these unnerving milestones in the efforts to test and manufacture the vaccine, it is interesting to contrast the social context of the 1950s. "It was a time of risk and reward outweighing the risk of getting harmed," Oshinsky stated. Both Colt and Oshinsky noted that the polio crusade took place at the time when the American public was less skeptical and had a different relationship to the role of science. They further noted that today's scientific advances may have longer time-lines.

The late Christopher Reeve also spoke to this issue. His opinions were noted in a 2004 *New York Times* article that was published at the time of his passing. Martin (2004) reported that Reeve challenged researchers to engage the same sense of urgency shown by emergency medical technicians who helped save his life. Reeve is recalled as saying, "I believe I speak on behalf of patients who are willing to accept failure as a necessary aspect of moving science forward... We want researchers to think less like academics and more like EMTs, whose primary function is to save lives."

### *The Role of the March of Dimes*

*The Polio Crusade* also deserves a sub-title, *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. Oshinsky emphasizes in his work that the polio crusade is not only about the achievement of the vaccine, but also about the cultural beginnings of public philanthropy.

David Rose provides insight into the guiding values of March of Dimes, stating its main mission since its inception is to "mesh volunteers with science." This core mission, intersecting with Basil O'Connor's spirited commitment, created a public health formula that transformed polio into a nationwide cause. O'Connor was committed to providing care for polio patients, funding scientific research and increasing public awareness of polio.

In a new approach to fundraising, O'Connor sought 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." As a result, something unexpected happened: Americans did send their dimes, and the news reel footage shows the compelling image of buckets of dimes rolling in. 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. Oshinsky added, “Nobody was too poor to give a dime to help a child walk again.”

Building on the momentum of Basil O’Connor’s appeal to the public, David Rose adds, the March of Dimes formulated a first-of-its-kind public relations machine, utilizing a wide variety of strategies. They were the first to consider the concept of a poster child, to organize public charity events and birthday balls, and to formulated engaging fundraising slogans such as “*Dance so that others may walk.*” The March of Dimes also commissioned public relations films such as *The Crippler*, in which the polio virus is depicted as a shadow that comes to inflict itself without warning on all children. “I have no prejudices,” says the foreboding voice-over recorded for the film. It may seem almost comical now, but comparable public health campaigns such as the “Your brain on drugs” campaign of the late 1980s are formulated in a similar vein.

While the administration of the polio vaccine was color-blind, the treatment of polio survivors was filtered through cultural mores of the period. 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. Rose notes that Roosevelt wanted the Warm Springs Rehabilitation Center to be integrated, but it was not possible in the segregated South. The archives of the March of Dimes provide further accounts of how the organization worked with racial issues of the time, as the access to care was not equal.

To meet the needs of the African American community, the March of Dimes funded the Tuskegee Institute, where African Americans were able to seek polio care. In addition, forgotten heroes such as Charles Bynum, a civil rights activist, 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. Efforts were taken to create a separate track of African-American poster children to raise awareness and to promote the need for rehabilitation. Basil O’Connor is also noted in March of Dimes history to have been a member of the board of the Tuskegee Institute.

The pioneering public health campaign of the March of Dimes--engaging celebrities, using public health announcements, assigning spokespersons, and hosting fundraising events--are now commonplace in today’s culture. Throughout the country, there are fundraisers, telethons, and walks for cures for a wide range of advocacy communities, ranging from breast cancer to HIV to Parkinson’s. Unfortunately, in today’s times, disease fundraising takes place in a competitive cultural climate. Factors such as stigma, marginalization and lack of

media attention create a more challenging social context than the era of the polio crusade.

### *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 the historically momentous first doses of the polio vaccine. She then provides an account of the children and adults who contracted polio.

The story of the polio survivors is a complex narrative based on actual interviews with survivors and family members. The personal story of Larry Becker, a PHI board member, is a central one in the collection. “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.

Colt also tells the story of Katherine Black, whose mother contracted polio as an adult and subsequently died. “The rest of the country was able to move on but that didn’t mean that polio was not still affecting her family.” Colt explains. The story of Annie Crockett-Stark’s brother, who contracted polio in Wytheville, Virginia, is also striking. She described in compelling detail how her parents took everything of her brother’s belongings--his entire identity, and “burned it in the front lawn.” Becker notes “I think once the vaccine came out, people had the attitude ‘well, that’s a relief. Polio is over’.” Colt’s efforts to tell these stories raise awareness of the countless American families who were shaped for a lifetime by the lasting effects of polio.

Becker adds that current advances in science have increased the life expectancy of people with disabilities such as spinal cord injury, polio, or multiple sclerosis, which was not the case 20 years ago. “We have lost grip of the second part of question,” Becker explains, “how people go on and re-establish their lives.” The long term health care needs of the chronically disabled continue to be problematic to this day.

Along this line, Lauro Halstead, MD, world renowned polio expert, poignantly expresses a similar point in his preface to Julie Silver’s book, *Post-Polio Syndrome*. He notes that the journey of polio survivors to maintain independence and manage their disability is ongoing. “On a broader level, we are like wounded veterans from some forgotten war, whose presence has vanished from the national consciousness.”

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. Both the film and the book evoke a commemorative tone, and suggest the idea that this narrative is one of a lost American ethos.

The American sensibility illustrated in the film may be a dated one, but the hopes and needs of people struggling with disease have not changed. 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**

*March of Dimes.org*

<http://www.marchofdimes.com/>

*The American Experience-- PBS*

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/polio/>

### **References**

- *Polio: An American Story* – David M. Oshinsky
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Reji Mathew, Ph.D. is a disability advocate and freelance writer. She is also a psychotherapist and clinical instructor at New York University. See her monthly column at Advance for occupational Therapy exploring the psychological aspects of recovery and rehabilitation. Contact her via email at [rm150@nyu.edu](mailto:rm150@nyu.edu)