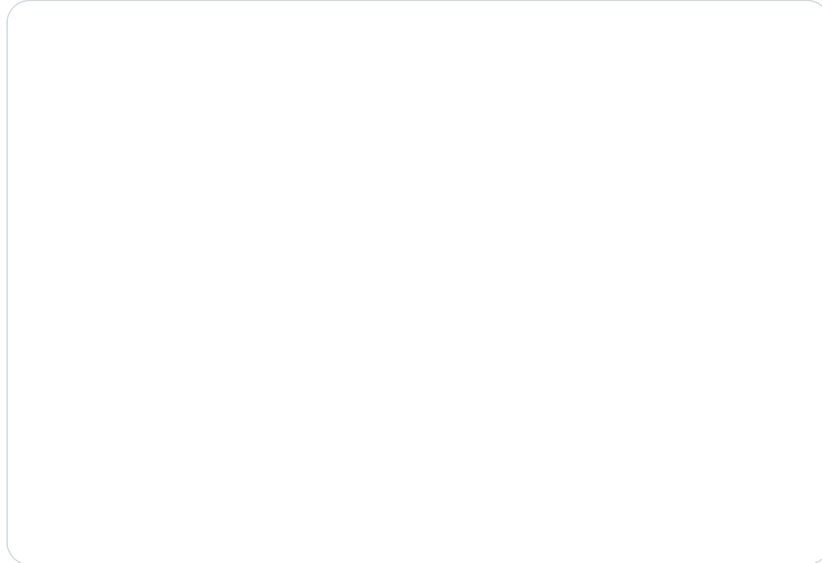


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1. The polio story as you learned it is wrong. It's one of the most often misunderstood sequence of events in the last two hundred years. I wanted to explain a few things about the disease to help people understand what actually happened.



2. The first modern account of something resembling polio was in 1789. A physician named Michael Underwood described an illness in children he called "Debility of the Lower Extremities." He attributed it to teething and foul bowels.
archive.org/details/b28771...

3. One of the next mentions was from Louisiana in 1841. A few children came down with paralysis. The supposed cause: teething. Why would teething be associated with paralysis?



4. Various stories appeared throughout the 1800s of children coming down with paralysis, almost always in their legs. Many people called it "teething paralysis," but others settled on "infantile paralysis."

5. This was a new phenomenon: Doctors had never seen it before and didn't know why it was happening. Research began to reveal that the cause of paralysis were lesions on the grey part of the spinal cord.

6. If you developed a lesion on your spinal cord, they called this a "poliomvelitis." Polio = grey. Mvelitis = inflammation of the

spinal cord.

7. A poliomyelitis was a lesion on your spinal cord. You could have more than one of them. But they didn't know why children had begun developing them, seemingly out of nowhere.

8. Scientists conducted research on animals by purposefully poisoning them with arsenic, an ingredient of popular medical remedies of the time. The result? Paralysis in their hind legs. collections.nlm.nih.gov/ext/dw/1015021...

9. When they did autopsies of the animals, they discovered lesions in their spinal cord. The animals had what they called "poliomyelitis."

10. During the 1800s, the most common medical treatments for any sickness contained mercury—in order to clear the bowels. Infants received mercury-containing teething powder.



11. This wasn't a fringe treatment, but something as common as Tylenol might be considered today. If the metal arsenic was known to cause poliomyelitis, then perhaps, so could mercury.

12. Throughout the 1800s, there were a few cases of infantile paralysis that would pop up here and there. Not really any epidemics. In the 1890s, something changed.

13. A new pesticide was invented in 1892 called lead arsenate near Boston, Mass to combat the spread of a foreign invader—the gypsy moth. It combined lead and arsenic together because it couldn't be easily washed off.

14. If you're interested, I talk about this whole story in my book, "The Moth in the Iron Lung." You can get it here:

amazon.com

The Moth in the Iron Lung: A Biography of Polio

A fascinating account of the world's most famous disease—polio—told as you have never heard it before. Epidemics of paralysis began to rage in the early ...

