

Tales of Two Vaccinations: From Polio to COVID

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We walked in pairs down the long school hallway and descended to the gymnasium – a parade of first- and second-graders on a polio vaccination march. The field trials of the Salk vaccine in 1954 had proven effective against poliomyelitis, and in 1955 the Salk vaccine was deemed safe and effective, and mass vaccination programs followed in public, private and parochial elementary schools nationwide over the next few years, including mine in Queens, NY.

Inside the gym, sleeves rolled up, we inched past long cafeteria tables filled with boxes of vials, syringes, bottles



Mary, vaccinated for COVID-19 in 2021, and at right, for polio in 1957.



of alcohol and cotton swabs. The school nurse and volunteer local doctors were armed and ready. One by one, we advanced to the ‘sticking’ station and surrendered to the inevitable. It stung! I think the needles were thicker back then. A “Stars ‘n Strips” Band-Aid was taped to the injection site (mine was red with white stars). We were told there would be a booster shot in two months.

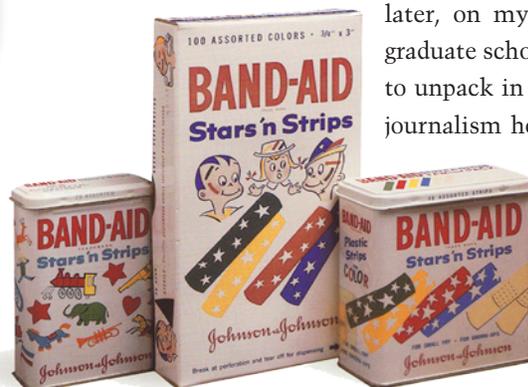
By the exit door, there were bowls of Tootsie Rolls, Chuckles, and silver-wrapped Hershey’s Kisses; the monitor watched to make sure we only picked one. And then we lined up and walked up the stairwell and down the long hallway and back to our classroom, passing the next group of little marchers on their way down.

No one, to my recollection, contracted polio in my school or neighborhood, which teemed with kids. But 16 years later, on my first day of graduate school, as I began to unpack in the women’s journalism housing co-op,



Early Polio Pioneers, 1954

In 1954, The March of Dimes organized testing of the Salk polio vaccine with 1.8 million schoolchildren who became known as “Polio Pioneers” and were part of the largest peacetime mobilization of volunteers in our history. In all, 1.3 million children took part as vaccine recipients, placebo recipients, or observed controls. The vaccine was declared “safe, effective, and potent” against paralytic polio on April 12, 1955. [MARCH OF DIMES, MARCHOFDIMES.ORG]



[COURTESY OF JOHNSON & JOHNSON ARCHIVES]

I saw a new arrival struggling in the hallway with her suitcase. She had canes attached to metal rings around her wrists. Polio, I immediately thought. Eventually, she shared what it was like to have polio as a child, and said she was one of the lucky ones. She never experienced an iron lung

and was not wheelchair-bound. And she had reconciled herself to becoming an editor rather than a reporter on the beat.

And now, decades later, the COVID-19 vaccines, another vaccination development milestone, has recently become available for the Baby Boomer cohort in many locations. The scramble to get appointments and not have them canceled is unnerving, but I did secure one after multiple attempts. Upon arrival at the dispensing facility we filed in, six feet apart, and went through a series of checkpoints and showed IDs. There were 500 slots filled for that day.

When it was my turn to be vaccinated, I walked up a stairwell to the second floor, checked in at the desk, and then down a long hallway following the blue arrows taped on the floor, and entered an exam room. I rolled up my sleeve and the provider checked my medical record on the computer and asked the required questions. After receiving the Moderna vaccination, she put a plain Band-Aid on my arm and gave me a paper sticker: "I Got My COVID-19 Vaccination" and the appointment card for dose 2. No red, starry Band-Aid, no candy, but nevertheless I felt relieved to have the insignia.

During the obligatory 15-minute observation period, there was a man in a wheelchair nearby, and I thought of my J-school roommate and hoped she had received the vaccine. I noted the cadre of masked Baby Boomers coming and going, and my thoughts drifted back to that day so long ago when we kids walked down the long school hallway and descended to the gymnasium, extended our small arms and became participants in and eyewitnesses to vaccination history – as well as the recipients of free candy! ❖

