Rare book documents an early American campaign against smallpox

by Kevin O’Brien

A newly-cataloged rare book in the Special Collections Department of the UIC Library of the Health Sciences provides some interesting historical context for current discussions on the importance of vaccination in the prevention of disease.

Residents of Milton, Massachusetts, alarmed at the occurrence of a smallpox outbreak in Boston in 1809, organized a town meeting on a Saturday afternoon in July of that year to discuss the possibility of vaccinating townspeople against the disease. Vaccination was a relatively new method, having only been introduced to the world in 1798 by the English surgeon Edward Jenner in his book *Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae*.

The meeting in Milton resulted in an organized effort to vaccinate the town’s inhabitants on a voluntary basis. The town physician, Amos Holbrook, was given the responsibility of carrying out the inoculations for a fee of twenty-five cents per resident. Following the method discovered by Jenner, an inoculation with a sample of cowpox (also called Kine Pock) was carried out later that month on those presenting themselves for vaccination, a total of 337 Miltonians.

As a further demonstration of confidence in the vaccine, the townspeople subsequently decided to inoculate with smallpox a group of children who had received the cowpox vaccine in July. A group of twelve was selected for inoculation by Amos Holbrook on October 10. All twelve were kept for observation at a hospital. None contracted the disease and the twelve children were discharged on October 25.

Milton’s voluntary inoculation program was deemed by its organizers to be a success. The town’s leaders undertook

The inscription to Vice President George Clinton reads, “This small volume of transactions to diffuse the benefit of Vaccination, is most respectfully presented, in behalf of their town, by the Milton Memorialists.” The date is March 2, 1812.
an energetic campaign to publicize the success of their experiment. The chief feature of their efforts was a printed collection of the documents and proclamations regarding the inoculation program which they widely distributed. A number of Milton’s neighboring towns immediately decided to emulate its example and in 1810 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed into law “An Act to diffuse the benefit of Inoculation for the Cow-Pox.”

The copy of the book held by the Special Collections Department is the text of the Cow Pox Act of 1810 bound together with the collection of the documents printed by behalf of the town of Milton to publicize the success of its vaccination efforts. It bears the title, A Collection of Papers Relative to the Transactions of the Town of Milton, in the State of Massachusetts: to promote a general inoculation of the cow pox, or kine pock, as a never failing preventive against small pox infection.

An additional attraction of this item is that this copy was presented to then-Vice-President George Clinton, shortly before he died near the end of his second term. An inscription to the Vice President is well preserved before the title page.

This fascinating document of an early American public health campaign may be read in the Special Collections reading room during regular hours.

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