

The 60th anniversary of the polio vaccine: It was seen as an absolute miracle and blessing

By ACSH Staff — April 14, 2015



This past Sunday, April 12th, marked the 60th anniversary of Jonas Salk

s polio vaccine being deemed safe, effective and potent after the largest clinical trial for a vaccine in history. The inactivated polio vaccine was licensed by the federal government *that very same day!* The Salk vaccine was found to be 80 to 90 percent effective in preventing polio.

David Oshinsky, the director of the Division of Medical Humanities at NYU Langone Medical Center and the Pulitzer-prize winning author of *Polio: An American Story*, [tells Forbes](#) [1]: People were hugging in the streets, kids were let out of school, Salk was invited to the White House where Eisenhower broke down in tears thanking him it was really this shining moment of great faith in science and in medical research. The nation went into this extraordinary, almost unprecedented celebration short of anything but the end of the world war. Americans sighed collectively in relief, knowing they finally had a prevention method for a truly horrifying disease of the almost 52,000 cases of polio in 1952, 21,000 resulted in paralysis.

Salk s son, Dr. Peter Salk, MD, president of the Jonas Salk Legacy Foundation, adds: The predominant effect of this announcement was a lifting of fear. It was seen as an absolute miracle and blessing.

Just a few weeks after the landmark press conference announcing the success of the vaccine, the tragic consequences of the contamination of vaccine produced at one pharmaceutical company the so-called Cutter incident was revealed, which became the largest pharmaceutical disaster in history. A contaminated vaccine batch containing a live polio virus from Cutter Laboratories in California led to the deaths of five children and 56 cases of paralysis. In the resulting outbreaks, five more deaths occurred and 112 were paralyzed. Still, the incident did not discourage Americans from giving their children the polio vaccine.

This faith and appreciation for vaccines is quite a change from today. Fast forward 60 years, where a mass of misguided anti-vaxxers not only believe that vaccines are unnecessary, but dangerous and deadly even [similar to a holocaust](#) [2]. [Some schools](#) [3], even in the most wealthy and privileged areas of the United States, have vaccination rates as low as South Sudan.

[Outbreaks of highly contagious diseases](#)

[4] occur that spread over several states, even though they could be easily prevented with vaccines.

Dr. Peter Salk explains the mistrust in vaccines that is prevalent today: Most of the people who are parents now didn't go through that fear, he said. They don't know firsthand what the world was like when these diseases were rampant.

David Oshinsky adds: I think [Jonas Salk] would be a little taken aback by the anti-vaccine movement and the damage it's doing when we have all these vaccines to prevent childhood diseases, he said. I think he'd be worried, as many of us are, if herd immunity drops below a certain level, that polio could come back again.

Indeed, in 2000, the CDC believed measles had been eradicated in the US. Yet due to the anti-vaccine movement, [the disease bounced back](#) [5]. While many anti-vaxxers will say that measles isn't a big deal (they're wrong [it is](#) [6]), their thoughts on polio are hopefully quite different. Only with high enough rates of vaccination can we leave vaccine-preventable diseases such as polio in the past.

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Links

[1] <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tarahaelle/2015/04/13/polio-vaccine-found-safe-and-effective-60-years-ago-what-would-salk-think-today/>

[2] <http://acsh.org/2015/04/rfk-jr-equates-vaccinations-to-a-holocaust-yes-he-went-there/>

[3] <http://acsh.org/2014/09/vaccination-rates-incredibly-low-affluent-hollywood-schools/>

[4] <http://acsh.org/2015/01/disneylands-measles-outbreak-continues-spread-100-percent-connected-anti-vaccine-movement/>

[5] <http://acsh.org/2015/03/legislators-respond-widespread-measles-outbreak/>

[6] <http://www.vox.com/2015/1/26/7907707/measles-symptoms-vaccine>