



Rush to create flu vaccine in 1970s led to outbreak of deadly illness, scientists say

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Vaccine in production

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ATLANTA — As the world waits for a coronavirus vaccine, WSB-TV staff members were reminded that 45 years ago, swine flu was the new and dangerous virus.

Channel 2's Dave Huddleston spoke with historians and doctors about how the fear of the virus led to disaster, and to the lingering consequences of government distrust and vaccine hesitancy.

In 1976, an outbreak of swine flu at Fort Dix, N.J., sickened five and killed one soldier. Scientists worried that 50 to 60 million Americans would be infected and immediately started planning for a pandemic.

“The fear of course, was that what we were going to get was a repeat of the great pandemic of 1918,” explained Dr. Brian Allen Drake, a history professor at the University of Georgia.

In 1918, about 675,000 Americans died from the Spanish flu, according to estimates by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

In 1976, Drake said, national leaders wanted to save lives.

“There was an effort to inoculate essentially as many people in the country as possible to prevent that.”

In six months, scientists had developed a vaccine. President Gerald Ford wanted everyone in America to get a flu shot to protect against the virus, according to [Discover Magazine](#).

More than 20 years after the swine flu scare, Dr. Glen Nowak was the CDC's National Immunization Program Communications Director. Nowak said that the agency learned from the events of 1976.

“Influenza is really unpredictable,” he said. “You can make a decision to ramp everything up and be prepared and try to prevent a lot of harm,” he said, “or you can wait and see what happens.”

The Ford administration chose to ramp up, but the prediction that 50 million Americans would be sickened by swine flu never came to fruition.

“You just don't know if that strain is going to be one that's going to cause a lot of illness, or it's going to be one where it really doesn't go beyond one or two people,” explained Nowak.

But of the 45 million people who were vaccinated, 450 developed Guillain-Barré syndrome -- a disorder that can cause muscle weakness, paralysis or even death.

“It wasn't picked up in the clinical trials,” said Nowak. “And it wasn't detected until millions of people were vaccinated because it was a one-in-100,000 event. You needed probably 10, 20, 30 people to experience Guillain-Barré syndrome before the light bulb went off, and you said, ‘Wow, this may really be related to the vaccine.’”

CONSEQUENCES TODAY

Huddleston dug through newspaper archives and found articles in which people feared getting a flu shot during the fall of the following year.

“I am terrified about getting a flu shot after all the troubles it caused last year,” wrote Martha W. on Sept. 26, 1977.

“A lot of politicians, columnists and members of the scientific community are criticizing the whole program as having been stupid and even dangerous,” wrote Dorothy R. in March. “I am wondering now whether all vaccinations are really safe and effective.”

Dr. Danny Branstetter, medical director of Infection Prevention at Wellstar Health System, said he still sees some of the same fears in 2020.

“Just about every day, I will hear someone, even health professionals, question flu vaccinations,” he said. “There are some people that I just can’t move, that no matter what data I show them, no matter what topics I try to discuss around vaccines, I can’t move them off their fear.”

Branstetter emphasized that vaccine developments and safety have evolved significantly since 1976.

“We’ve progressed quite a bit in how we have protected people, but also in the efficiency with which we can make those,” he explained.

“It’s more likely you’re going to have complications from the disease we’re trying to prevent, than from the actual vaccine.”

Medical doctors and public health experts are urging Americans to get flu shots this year to prevent a twindemic.

LESSONS LEARNED

“The number one take-away is, you have to be cautious when you’re interpreting or deciding what to do in response to the discovery of a new virus,” said Nowak. “And you have to tell people about the reasons you’re being cautious.”

Dr. Nowak said 1976 also illustrated that when politics become involved with science, managing public health becomes difficult.

Because President Ford was aiming for reelection in 1976, some question if the mass vaccination campaign was politically motivated, according to [Discover Magazine](#).

“In 1976, I think what happened was they were beginning to realize the scientific and public health level that what they imagined was going to happen didn’t appear to be happening,” explained Nowak.

“But at that point, so many resources have been devoted to producing and making a vaccine, and there were so many promises about getting people vaccinated, it would have been hard to say, ‘We don’t need that vaccine. Thanks for all that investment of time and resources, but it doesn’t look like it’s necessary.’ That’s a really difficult thing to do.”

As scientists race to create a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, Nowak said that it’s vital that scientists, public health experts and political leaders are all on the same page.

“We’re going to have to figure out how to have more unified messaging and more unified recommendations and broader support for the actions that they’re taking.”

(Bron: <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/atlanta/rush-create-flu-vaccine-1970s-led-outbreak-deadly-illness-scientists-say/6BMGRZDSPJHCHNCMCXVATDCGMQ/>).