

A Death from Measles

From time to time I still receive messages of sympathy from people who knew my sister Helene sixty years ago. She died of complications of measles at the age of 13.

She had been sick with measles for a few days when, suddenly one afternoon, she could not be roused. We sent for the doctor, he sent for an ambulance, and she was taken to a hospital some miles away, now suffering not just from measles but encephalitis. We were told that if she survived she might be brain-damaged. She lay in a coma for a week before dying. Maybe it is because of her final, indissoluble connection to the realm of medicine that I find myself imagining that, had she lived, she might have become a nurse.

The loss of my sister, their youngest child and only girl, must have devastated my parents, though they spoke little about it. They carried on with their lives as best they could. In the end they were simple people—my father a parts manager at a Chevy dealer, my mother a secretary—and in their simplicity they knew there was nothing to be done about their loss but bear it.

As it happens, two measles vaccines were already available at the time of my sister's death in 1965. In a front-page article in the New York Times of 22 March 1963, the Surgeon General, Luther Terry, held out the hope that the newly licensed vaccines would lead to the prompt eradication of the disease from the United States. In the event, it was not so prompt, and even then only temporary. Over time, the numbers of both cases and deaths dwindled, until measles was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000, only

to return (albeit on a scale nothing like the pre-vaccine era) with the rise of vaccine refusers.

Given that the vaccines were celebrated in the press upon their arrival in 1963, my parents presumably knew about them well before my sister fell ill. Did they blame themselves for not seeking them out? In real time, of course, my parents could never have foreseen their need of a vaccine. After all, measles was not the dread of every parent like polio, for which a vaccine arrived in the 1950's like manna from heaven. In popular lore measles was a rite of passage for children, troublesome but not life-threatening. No doubt it was because measles did not conjure terror that the public was content to vaccinate infants and did not rush to protect children of my sister's age. In the New York Times article, Dr. Terry spoke of infants, leaving the status of the rest of the vulnerable population unclear.

But if my parents had decided to vaccinate their children against measles in 1963 (as in fact they did not), how would they have gone about it? By asking the doctor.

In 1965 TV was not yet overrun with beguiling drug ads advising the viewer to "ask your doctor"; such refinements of the art of cajolery became legal only in 1997. People like my parents, which is to say ordinary people, did not think it their place to prompt their doctor to do anything. They followed, or perhaps failed to follow, the doctor's orders; they did not coax the doctor. Our doctor, a Germanic figure, had an education and held a status far above my parents, in whom the ethos of deference remained strong. Without doubt they would have felt that the decision to vaccinate a child of twelve against measles

belonged to him, not them. They were not going to tell the doctor his business. They were trusting people and did not possess an adversarial mentality.

And if my parents were not the kind who would have pressed the family doctor for a vaccine, still less were they about to sue him for failing to vaccinate. They didn't have the means to launch a speculative action against a figure who stood higher in the community than they, and at best would have felt that suing a doctor for not foretelling the future was throwing good money after bad. But it wasn't really a matter of money. Nothing they said or did, at the time or later, suggested to me that they blamed the doctor in the first place. (A year later, the same man administered my travel vaccinations when I went to Europe.) My parents lacked the vindictive instincts necessary to make the doctor pay for the death of their child.

This lack was all the more marked in that my mother had a sister with a way of making cutting comments and accusatory judgments about all and sundry, including doctors, whom she saw often. A charismatic woman, she was possibly just the sort of person who would make a public cause of a private grief—the one thing my parents would never do. It was from her that I first learned that my sister died of a preventable disease, and in emphasizing this she appeared to blame my parents, the doctor, or all of them for my sister's fate. For so great a loss there must be responsibility. However, I have never been able to bring myself to feel or believe that anyone was responsible for my sister's death, least of all my parents. Her death was a misfortune, not a tort; the work of a microbe, not actionable human error.

As the world knows, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Pres. Trump’s nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services, has impugned the MMR (that is, measles-mumps-rubella) vaccine, alleging that it is associated with autism. Whereas [the Kennedy clan once promoted vaccination for measles](#) on the grounds that encephalitis—a complication of measles, as in the case of my sister—can cause mental retardation, this Kennedy [has more than flirted with the notion that the measles vaccine itself causes a mental disorder](#). The spurious linkage between the MMR vaccine and autism goes back to a paper by Andrew Wakefield et al. published in The Lancet in 1998 and [retracted in 2010](#)—a document worthy of a position of eternal infamy in the history of medicine. RFK Jr. now avows that he isn’t really opposed to the measles vaccine, but the question remains: how did a know-nothing get nominated for HHS Secretary to begin with?

RFK Jr. was born to the purple, of course, but in addition to inheriting a name he acquired one as a sort of gadfly of the drug industry. A lawyer, he has made pots of money by referring clients to other lawyers who specialize in suing the makers of pharmaceuticals, including vaccines. Some believe, not irrationally, that as Secretary of HHS he may expose the makers of vaccines to litigation by the likes of his friends. (Notably, Wakefield’s paper which brought the MMR vaccine into disrepute was itself [“funded by lawyers who were acting for parents who were involved in lawsuits against vaccine manufacturers.”](#)) But if his record on the MMR vaccine and even the polio vaccine—the gold standard of a gift to humanity—is deplorable, so is his self-portrayal as a speaker of truth to power.

Nowadays it seems to be axiomatic that we exist to “advocate for” noble causes (and what they are, we all know). When people use this neologism, do they realize what

they are really saying, namely, that we are all supposed to play the lawyer? French: avocat. Spanish: abogado. Swedish: advokat. Each means “lawyer.” To “advocate for” our noble cause, as RFK Jr. has advocated for his version of public health, is to accuse, allege, defame, orate, blather—to speak less and more than the truth at the same time. Polluting the public realm in this manner, and in the name of the environment, no less, has made RFK Jr. a disruptor of the kind that seems to appeal to his patron, Pres. Trump.

My parents in their innocence were never tempted to go public and never supposed that by dint of activism they could make something good come from the death of their child. They didn’t campaign to raise awareness of the measles vaccine, or the dangers of measles itself, so that other parents would not have to go through what they did. In those days of comparative reticence they kept their grief to themselves. Publicity they left to the same media that announced the advent of the measles vaccine in 1963, such as the New York Times. Neither did they seek to make a public example of their doctor by punishing him in a court of law. How much wiser they were than the crusaders and seekers of justice, like RFK Jr., who have debased the concept of justice to the point of parody.

In the manner of true wisdom, my parents did not even know they were wise. They simply bore their lot as human beings always have.