

# Women's spaces of knowledge: Lady Mary's contribution to the Covid vaccine.

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# Lady Mary Wortley Montagu



# Abstract

In 2019 a new coronavirus started a pandemic, prompting global pharmaceutical companies to develop new vaccines. There followed a series of 'lockdowns' during which I turned my thoughts to vaccination: to its beginnings.

It was during one of the 'releases' from lockdown when I was walking in the heart of Thomas Hardy's 'Wessex' that I came across a plaque to Benjamin Jesty (1736 – 1816). It told of his deliberately inducing smallpox immunity in his servants and family by inoculating them with cowpox. Folklore remedies involving cowpox were known about in many dairy-farming communities, where local midwives oversaw these practices. His treatments predated the work of Edward Jenner (1796) who is usually credited with the discovery of smallpox vaccine, by some 20 years.

Historical records revealed that primitive forms of vaccination were used as early as 1549 in China, and somewhat later in India, Africa and the Ottoman Empire.

But, in 1717, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote to her friend:

*'I am going to tell you a thing... The small-pox, so fatal, and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless. . . . There is a set of old women, who perform the operation,... with a nut-shell full of small-pox, ... She puts into the vein as much matter as can lie upon the head of her needle, and after that, binds up the little wound . . . .'*

And then she told the King!

# It's between me and my subject

*'I suggest then that all research and (scholarly) writing is in some ways auto/biographical, involving intersections of the lives of those who write and those who are written about.'* G Letherby, 2022, *Thirty years and Counting*. Vol 3.(1) 13-31

- In recognising my *intersection*, and clearly locating my 'self' in relation to my chosen 'other' has two results:
  - i. my point of view
  - ii. the view of Lady Mary

# Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (née Pierrepont)

- born 15 May 1689 – died 21 August 1762
- English aristocratic lady of letters.
- Introduced smallpox inoculation to Britain and Western Europe.
- She promoted inoculation widely (later superseded by Edward Jenner's vaccination)
- The first use of preventative antibodies in Europe.

[Lady Mary Wortley Montagu](#) [Charles Jervas](#), 1716



# Biographic details

- Eloped, aged 23, to marry Edward Wortley Montagu.
- Became a socialite, in the court of George I.
- Her brother died from smallpox, when he was 20 .
- Lady Mary contracted smallpox two years later (1715) and recovered, but lost her beauty.
- 1716, Edward appointed Ambassador to the Ottoman empire and they move to Constantinople (Istanbul) where local women invite Mary into their harems.
- Lady Mary told about variolation or 'engrafting' against smallpox by these women.
- She asks the British Embassy's surgeon to inoculate her son.
- 1721 global smallpox epidemic.
- Her daughter inoculated before family return to London.
- Hostile opposition and objections because it is oriental, irreligious/un-Christian, medically unorthodox, a craze promoted by ignorant women.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu with her son, Edward and attendants  
by Jean Baptiste Vanmour





# How inoculation gained popularity in England

- Caroline, Princess of Wales, asked George I for permission to inoculate her children, the Royal heirs.
- He said NO!
- Then 6 prisoners (♀♂), and 11 orphans were inoculated in the 1st 'clinical trial'.
- King George allowed his granddaughters to be inoculated, but not his male heirs to the throne.

# Benjamin Jesty

1736 – 1816



- Portrait by Michael W Sharp, 1805
- He was a farmer, living in Yetminster, Dorset.
- Expt. with cow-pox to prevent small-pox infections
- Everyone 'knew' that milkmaids never got small pox.

# Jesty's experiments

- 1774 smallpox epidemic
- Jesty deliberately infected his wife and two sons with cowpox taken from an infected cow.
- 1805 received an invitation to visit the offices of the Original Vaccine Pock Institution in London.
- 12 'examining officers' attested to the "antivariolus efficacy" of Jesty's methods.



Dr Edward Jenner  
the first vaccine  
1796.

Getty Images

# Edward Jenner

17 May 1749 – 26 January 1823

- He was 'variolated' when 8.
- Developed a safer technique of vaccination using cowpox instead of smallpox.
- 'Blossom the Cow'
- The Latin for cow is *vacca*, and cowpox *vaccinia*; Jenner called his new procedure *vaccination*.
- Jenner was a member of the Royal Society and physician to George IV.
- Known as 'The Grandfather of Vaccination', first person to confer scientific status on the procedure !



© Edward Jenner Museum, Berkeley, UK

The question I wished to explore through this research is predicated on the words of the Victorian polymath, Francis Galton

In **science** the credit goes to the **man** who convinces the world, not to the woman [or man] to whom the idea first occurs.



Memorial to the Rt. Hon. Lady Mary Wortley Montague in Lichfield cathedral.

Who happily introduced from Turkey, into this Country, The Salutary Art of inoculating the Small Pox. Convinced of its Efficacy she first tried it with Success on her own Children. And then recommended the practice of it to her fellow Citizens. Thus by her example and advice we have softened the virulence and escaped the danger of this malignant disease.

# The women behind the Covid 19 vaccines

- **Professor Sarah Gilbert – Oxford / Astra Zeneca**
- **Dr Kathrin Jansen – Pfizer**
- **Professor Hanneke Schuitemaker – Johnson & Johnson**
- **Dr Katalin Kariko- Penn Medicine**
- **Elena Smolyarchuk- Sputnik V**
- **Nita Patel - Novavax.**
- **Dr. Türeci - BioNTech**
- **And many, many more.....**



# Smallpox and Covid statistics

- smallpox first evidence 4,000 years ago.
- 1967 pandemic, 15 million people contracted smallpox and 2 million died [WHO].
- World Health Assembly declared the world free of smallpox in 1980.
- Dec. 2019 Covid 19 identified in Wuhan City, China.
- March 2020 Covid declared a pandemic.
- WHO estimate death toll from COVID-19 between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021 was approximately 14.9 million and the numbers continue to rise...

# Further reading

- *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment.* Isobel Grundy. Published by Oxford University Press, 1999.
- *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, 1708–1720.* Oxford University Press, 1965.

