



The Vaccine Race: Science, Politics, and the Human Costs of Defeating Disease in Postwar America

Meredith Wadman

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The epic and controversial story of the development of the first widely used normal human cell-line and, through it, some of the world's most important vaccines

In June 1962, a young biologist at the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia, Leonard Hayflick, using tissue extracted from an aborted fetus from Sweden, finally created the sterile biological environment that would allow for the creation of vaccines against common childhood diseases like measles, mumps, and rubella, along with less common killers like hepatitis. Before the German measles vaccine was invented, tens of thousands of children suffered crippling birth defects if their mothers were exposed to the disease while pregnant.

The vaccine itself was developed by Hayflick's colleague Stanley Plotkin, in the midst of a devastating rubella epidemic that swept the country in 1964 and 1965. Plotkin's vaccine effectively wiped out home-grown rubella. The fetal cells that Hayflick derived are used to make vaccines that have now been given to nearly 350 million people—the overwhelming majority of them U.S. preschoolers; a copycat group of cells, developed with the methods that Hayflick pioneered, has been used to make an additional six billion vaccines. They have protected people the world over from polio, rabies, chicken pox, measles, hepatitis A, shingles, and adenovirus.

Meredith Wadman's masterful account recovers not only the science of this urgent race, but the political roadblocks that nearly stopped the scientists. It also tells a profoundly human story about the agony of pregnant women exposed to German measles, the ethics of testing on infants, orphans and mentally disabled children, the war (still raging) over using human fetal tissue in research, and yet another unrecognized woman whose cells have been used to save countless lives. It also tracks the arrival of big commerce onto campus labs: in the 1960s and 1970s, a tug-of-war over who "owned" the cells peaked just as huge changes occurred in attitudes and laws governing who could make money from biological inventions, turning scientists into biotech entrepreneurs almost overnight. No medical story could have more human drama, impact, or urgency today.

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