

Dr. Benjamin Rush, Alexander Hamilton, Peter Porcupine and the Politicization of Epidemics

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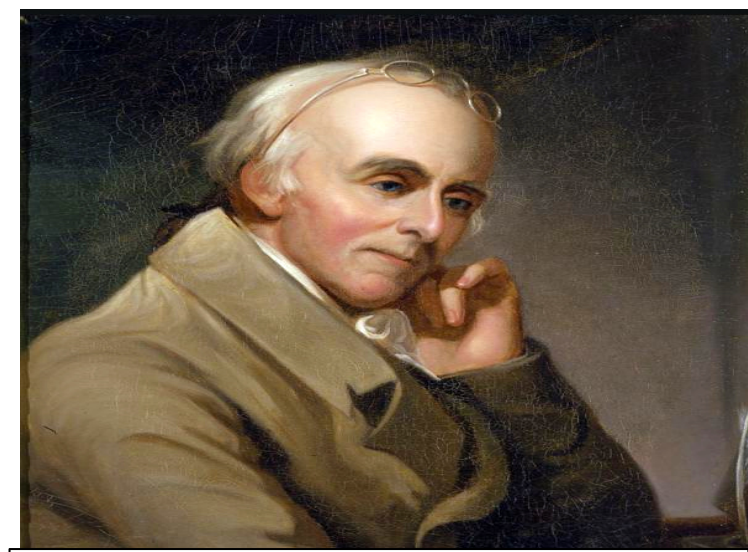
Abstract

Concerns about comingling politics, medical care, and an epidemic are not new. The problems we are facing now with the novel coronavirus and its effects on our government, health system, and media are repeating.

In 1793 the yellow fever epidemic swept through our nation. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a founding father, and a physician, had his professional peers attempt to discredit his medical advice because of previous political ideals he held after the American Revolution.



Benjamin Rush by C.W. Peale (1783)¹¹



Benjamin Rush by Thomas Sully (1812)¹²

Remedies became a political statement. People decided on treatments based on the political agenda of doctors and famous endorsers of treatments.

Newspapers and pamphlets were a new form of media following the Declaration of Independence. The media realized that by embellishing and publishing scandalous stories, they would sell more papers. Unfortunately, the press negatively affected medical providers, treatment, and the spread of disease. As we can see, the past events have re-emerged, and problems that we as Americans were facing during the 1764 smallpox epidemic and the 1793 yellow fever epidemic are relevant today.

History

The Declaration on Independence was declared on July 4, 1776, and signed on Aug 2, 1776. Among the names that signed the Declaration of Independence were Dr. Benjamin Rush and four other physicians Dr. Lyman Hall, Dr. Mathew Thornton, Dr. Josiah Bartlett, and Oliver Wolcott^{11,18}. Dr. Rush spent his time during the Revolutionary War as a medic and consulted General Washington on keeping his army healthy. During the Revolutionary War, Rush held a position as Surgeon General for the middle states^{7(p200)}. After the war ended in 1783, Dr. Rush continued teaching as a physician and held a position in office as Treasurer of the U.S. Mint ^{7(p395)}. In 1790, Philadelphia was the nation's capital ^{7(p334)}.

Medical innovation was on the rise. Pennsylvania Hospital, the first hospital in the colonies, was built in 1751 ^{7(p32)}. In the colonies, doctors trained by apprenticeship or by traveling abroad for medical school^{7(p30)}. College of Philadelphia the first medical school in the colonies opened in 1765 with substantial help from Dr. Rush ^{7(p41)}.

In 1793 Philadelphia became the center for the yellow fever epidemic. 5,000 or 10 percent of the people in Philadelphia died from yellow fever ^{7(p367)}. There was no cure, and doctors had no idea how yellow fever spread.



Pennsylvania Hospital¹³

Medical Remedies

In 1793 doctors at the College of Physicians met to discuss the epidemic. Many doctors had personal animosities and professional jealousy with each other, but they agreed on preventative measures, ^{7(p349-350)}

Preventative Measure of 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic^{7(p350)}

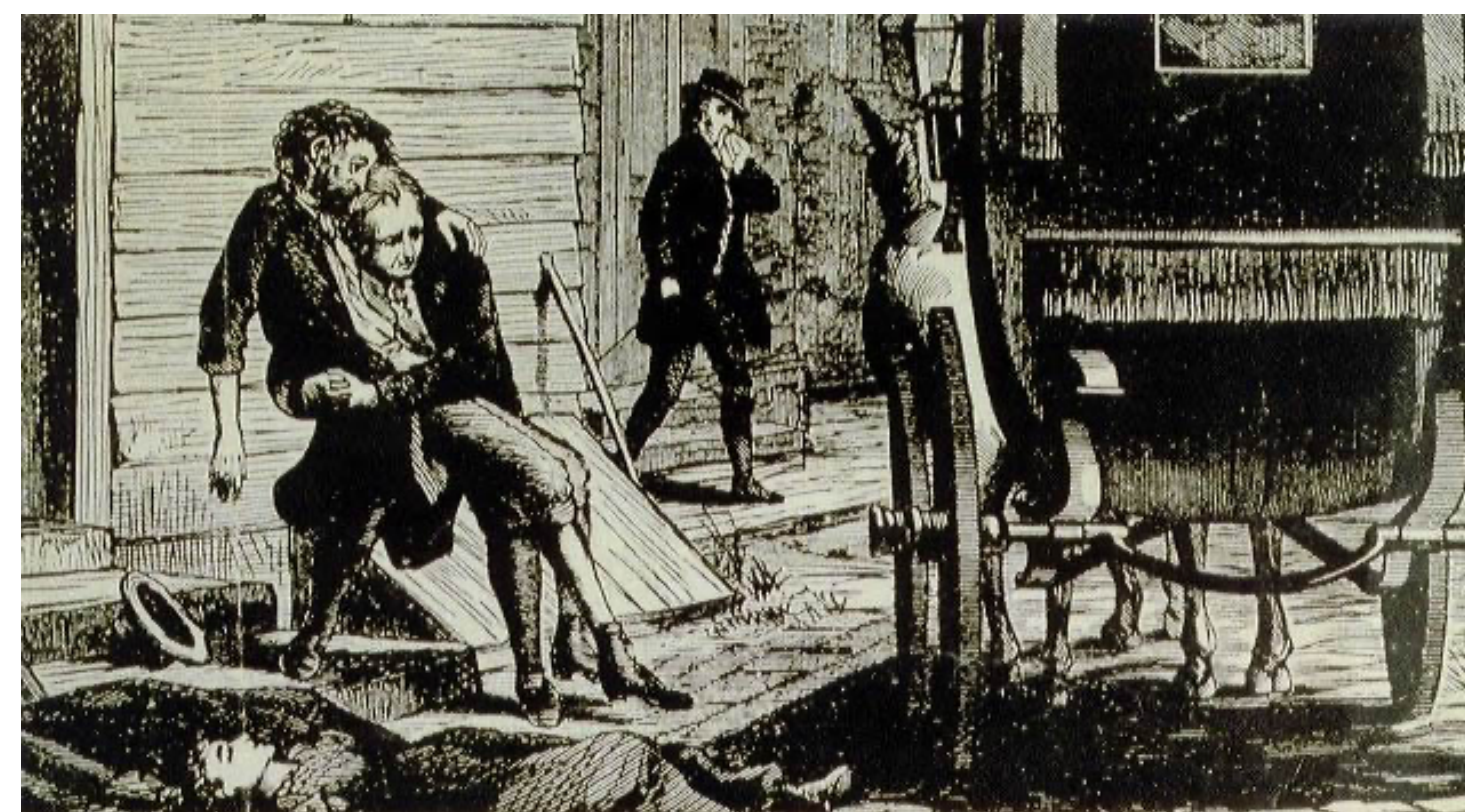
No unnecessary interaction with others.
Place mark on the door of the home of an infected person.
Linens frequently changed and washed.
Dead buried privately as possible.
Creating a new hospital for the poor.

Dr. Rush's Treatments^{7(p352)}

Mercurial Antidote: calomel, mercury chloride, and jalap downed with chicken water
Bloodletting
Purges

Dr. George Stevens and Dr. William Currie published a pamphlet recommending^{7(p353)}

Fresh air
Mild Purgatives
Ammonia
Encouraged Perspiration



Man Helping Sick Person 1900⁹

Preventative measures have not changed all that much in 200 years.

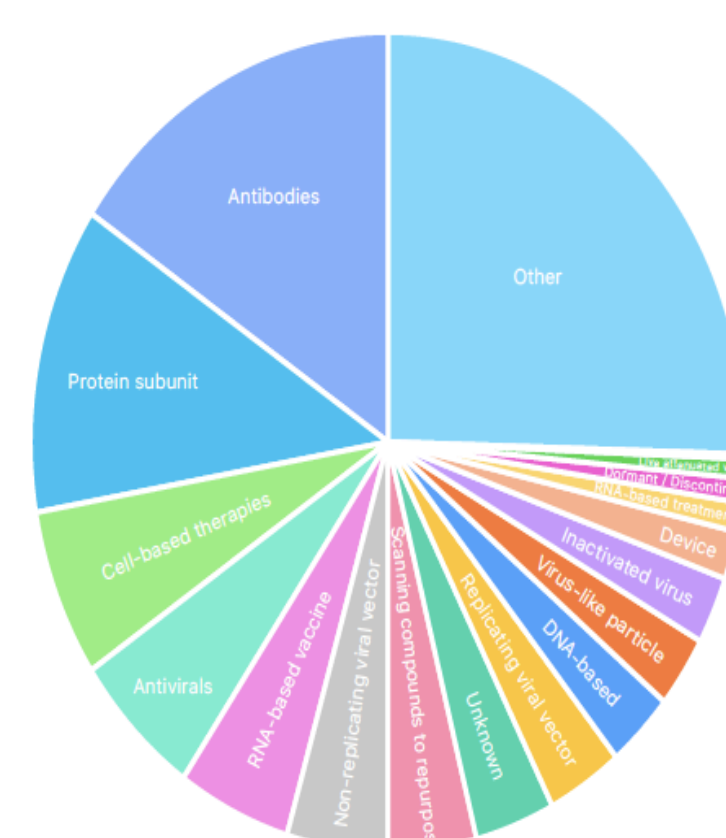
Coronavirus Preventative Measures:

Quarantine
Washing Hands
Wearing Masks

In recent months we have seen an uprise of possible coronavirus remedies, but the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved none. Scientists all over the world are attempting to create a coronavirus vaccine. It has become a race between nations. The Milken Institute claims that there are 316 possible treatments and 202 vaccines currently in development ³.

Other Potential Treatments^{10,16}

Antiviral drugs: Favipiravir and Merimepodib,
Corticosteroids: Dexamethasone, Prednisone, Methylprednisolone and Hydrocortisone
Anti-inflammatory drugs
Immune-base therapy: Convalescent Plasma
Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine



Charts created by Milken Institute³

Political

Politicians from the 1790s and 2020 are not so different regarding the epidemic response. In 1792 Alexander Hamilton and Dr. Rush repeatedly argued because of their political beliefs^{7(p341)}. Hamilton claimed that he contracted yellow fever and was cured by a nonaggressive form of treatment Dr. Stevens promoted ^{7(p354)}. Dr. Rush prescribed very aggressive medicine for the time to combat yellow fever. Because Hamilton is the father of Federalism, the newspaper *Federalist Press* praised Dr. Stevens and called it a “Federalist cure” after Hamilton published his endorsement supporting Dr. Stevens ^{7(p354)}. Even the hospital where patients went to seek medical treatments carried a political statement. Dr. Curry and Dr. Stevens faculty at Bush Hill hospital became an alternative to Rush's treatments. In political circles, it became a Federalist hospital ^{7(p358)}.



Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Rush ²

Today government and healthcare are closely intertwined. As of April of 2020 49, state and local public health officials have resigned, retired, or been dismissed across 23 states¹⁸. Health officials are leaving office because of the lack of support they are receiving from higher political powers¹⁸. Unpopular policies such as masking policies have turned many state and federal government officials against public health officials. Lori Tremmel Freeman, CEO of the National Associate of County and City Health Officials, said, “It's not a health divide. It's a political divide”¹⁸. President Trump muted the CDC, which many believe will cause coronavirus information to be utilized by politicians or withheld from the public⁴.



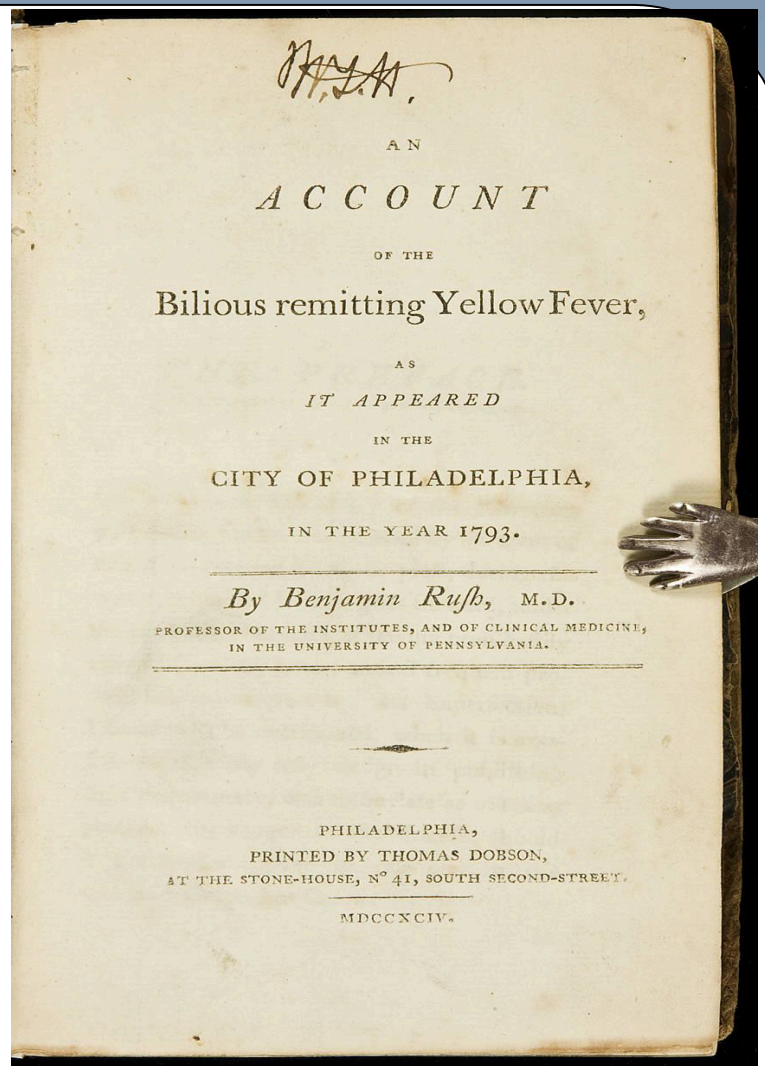
President Trump Holds Daily Coronavirus Task Force Briefing In Rose Garden¹

Media

In 1793 books, pamphlets, and published letters were used to communicate with the public and discredit doctors and their remedies. Dr. George Stevens and Dr. William Currie published a pamphlet recommending fresh air, mild purgatives, ammonia, and perspiration ^{7(p353)}. Dr. Rush would use the media to criticize doctors when their treatments did not work ^{7(p353)}. Dr. Stevens and Dr. Currie would, in return, publicly criticize why anyone would use Dr. Rush's treatment when their mild therapies worked^{7(p353)}. Rush's friend and colleague Adam Kuhn published in the *Federal Gazette* endorsing common treatments for yellow fever ^{7(p355)}.

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Since Stephan Girard was French and George Stevens was from the French Caribbean's. Rush described their treatments as "The French remedies" to make it sound un-American^{7(p358)}. Rush published the book "*An account of Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever as it appeared in the City of Philadelphia in the Year 1793*". In this book, Rush pointed out others' mistakes and injustice ^{7(p372)}. William Cobbett, most well known as Peter Porcupine, wrote about Rush for pamphlet sales. We similarly see statements used to promote media coverage ^{7(p392)}. During the smallpox epidemic of 1764, we noticed that newspapers such as the *Boston Gazette* printing "health controversies" to increase sales^{6(p60)}.



First Edition of Rush's book on the Yellow Fever Epidemic^{7(p372)}

The media has been used strategically by using politics and remedies to influence the public and promote ratings and viewership. Media such as television, news, and social media reach the masses. Like Rush, President Trump has used language such as the "Chinese Virus" to emphasize that this virus is foreign⁵. The president and his alias have insisted on the effectiveness of Hydroxychloroquine as a coronavirus treatment during the news press⁴. "White House trade adviser Peter Navarro recently questioned the experience and medical judgment of Dr. Anthony Fauci — dragging his reported dispute with the nation's top infectious diseases expert out of the White House Situation Room and onto cable news" ⁴. Fauci claiming that there was not enough clinical evidence of the medication working ⁴.



Present Trump and DeAnne Lorraine Tweet¹⁷

Conclusions

We should recognize political debate about medical treatment; however, need to put our faith in the medical system and stop using the media to attack each other. Doctors, scientists, and public officials need to work together to create a safe environment and find possible treatments. Nobody knows the long-term effects or how long this epidemic will last, but we can learn from our founding fathers and stop making the same mistakes. “Science and technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition, and myth frame our response.” ~ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.¹⁵

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