



A pox upon human folly

The concept of using smallpox as a weapon is not new. In the 17th century, long before the cause of smallpox was known, Shakespeare was in the habit of having his characters call down the “pox” as a curse, eg, “A pox o’ your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!”*

Although the concept is old, the practical capability, and possibly the suicidal willingness to do it, is new and frightening.

The threat of voluntary initiation of a smallpox epidemic as a terrorist act has brought the United States to the brink of embarking on a wholesale vaccination program for this once-eradicated disease, despite the huge financial and human cost this is sure to entail.

For this issue of the *Journal* (page 80), Dr. Steve Gordon has reviewed the medical issues confronting us as we contemplate moving down the vaccination trail. They are worrisome and significant, and they raise the issue once again of whether the mere threat of such a bioterrorist attack has put us in the position of doing the terrorist’s work for him. On one hand, we have the issues of possible harm to the vaccine recipients, harm to people coming in contact with them while they are still “shedding” live virus, questions about the vaccine’s effectiveness, and our willingness to sue the living daylights out of everyone in sight if anything goes wrong. On the other hand, while we are busily engaged in trying to protect ourselves against smallpox, what about the various other terrorist avenues of attack? What about anthrax, a whole slew of viruses almost too horrible to contemplate, neurotoxins, etc, a list that goes on seemingly almost without end? Vaccination against smallpox won’t confer any protection against any of these agents.

The choices are not pretty or easy. And perhaps it comes down to the nasty conclusion that we really don’t have any choice. We may have to provide whatever protection we can for the population. This is, however, about as close to a no-win situation as I can imagine, and given the apparent willingness of our current enemies to sacrifice anything for their cause, it won’t be the last time we are faced with this type of situation.

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*Shakespeare W. *The Tempest*. Act 1, scene 1, line 21 (1611). Many other examples exist in the works of Shakespeare and others.