

Poliomyelitis Records
1916
Mss.Ms.Coll.33

American Philosophical Society
2003
105 South Fifth Street
Philadelphia, PA, 19106
215-440-3400
manuscripts@amphilsoc.org

Table of Contents

Summary Information	3
Background note	4
Scope & content	5
Administrative Information	6
Related Materials	6
Indexing Terms	7
Bibliography	7
Collection Inventory	8
Series I. Cases with known source of infection.....	8
Series II. Cases without known source of infection.....	9
Series III. Miscellaneous.....	11
Series IV. Card files.....	12

Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Title	Poliomyelitis Records
Date	1916
Call number	Mss.Ms.Coll.33
Extent	29.5 Linear feet
Extent	29.5 linear feet
Location	LH-B-41-4; LH-B-24-3 (OS)
Language	English
Abstract	<p>The Board of Health in New York City joined with scientists from the Rockefeller Institute to study the poliomyelitis epidemic that struck the city during the summer of 1916. Using a small army of nurses and public health professionals, they canvassed the city for all reported cases of the disease, assessed conditions that might contribute to its spread, and enforced quarantine.</p> <p>The records collected by the Department of Health in New York City during the poliomyelitis epidemic of 1916 were gathered by nurses who canvassed every neighborhood in the city to determine which children were stricken, the conditions that may have contributed to the disease, and whether a quarantine was in force.</p>
Preferred Citation	Cite as: New York (City). Department of Health Poliomyelitis Records, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

A devastating disease, poliomyelitis attacks the motor nerve cells in the spinal cord, often leading to permanent paralysis or, in the most severe cases, death. The pathogen causing polio was identified by Karl Landsteiner in 1908 as a filterable virus, but the carrier of the virus and mode of transmission remained topics for heated debate for many years. Although it was known to strike the wealthy as well as the poor, in the popular imagination, the disease was indelibly associated with filth, vermin, and the poor.

The poliomyelitis epidemic that struck in the summer of 1916 was one of the largest ever in the United States, with over 27,000 cases reported from 26 states -- 8,900 in New York City alone -- and a mortality rate approaching 25%. In response, the emerging class of health professionals in New York intervened with a broad epidemiological and public health campaign using both the legal recourse available to them by virtue of new public health legislation and the old nostrum of moral suasion to convince the vulnerable into cleanliness and salubrious habits.

The center of polio research at the time was New York's own Rockefeller Institute, and drawing upon this expertise, the Department of Health formed a committee to investigate the epidemiology of the disease and to find ways of limiting its spread. Initially, their focus fell on the poorer wards of the city, particularly on the Italian immigrant communities, and working within the dominant paradigm of disease as a product of filth, the Department of Health waged a public health propaganda campaign, sponsoring fly catching or rat killing contests in the belief that these would eliminate disease vectors. Stray pets -- also putative disease vectors -- were rounded up and slaughtered by the thousands.

At the height of the epidemic in July and August, near panic set in to the city, with hundreds attempting to flee for healthier locations and the Department of Health attempting equally hard to prevent the flight, stationing police along all of the major roads to prevent unauthorized persons from entering or departing. The paradoxical finding of the research, however, was that the incidence of polio infection was ultimately not directly correlated with conditions of filth, insufficient nutrition, overcrowding, uncleanliness, or the presence of vermin. Instead, it seemed to affect the poor less severely than the middle class. From a present day perspective, the majority of children in poor communities were exposed to the polio virus early in life when the effects of the disease were less virulent, while middle class children contracted it only later. The epidemic subsided as the weather cooled in the late fall and early winter.

Scope & content

The records collected by the Department of Health in New York City during the poliomyelitis epidemic of 1916 were gathered by nurses who canvassed every neighborhood in the city to determine which children were stricken, the conditions that may have contributed to the disease, and whether a quarantine was in force. Consisting of 28.5 linear feet of records, mostly arranged by patient name, the collection is divided into four series, as originally organized:

Series I. Cases with known source of infection	1916	5 linear feet
Series II. Cases without known source of infection	1916	16.5 linear feet
Series III. Miscellaneous	1916	3 linear feet
Series IV. Card files	1916	5 linear feet

The data collected include brief case histories of each sick child, with notes on, among other things, the patient's nationality, residence, health and sanitation conditions, type of housing, breast or bottle feeding, and a survey of buildings and the surrounding area.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2003

Restrictions

Restrictions on Use

Patient names may not be published.

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Gift of the Rockefeller Institute, 1964.

These records may have been kept by Flexner at the Rockefeller Institute in his capacity as vice-chair of the special committee formed in the summer of 1916 to investigate the epidemic. There is some possibility, however, that the records were transferred to the Rockefeller at some later date, where they were incorporated into the collections prior to their transfer to the APS in 1964.

Processing Information

Recatalogued by rsc, 2003.

Related Materials

Related Material

The Simon Flexner Papers contains a quantity of additional information on the 1916 study of poliomyelitis filed under "Poliomyelitis" and under the names of individual physicians and scientists interested in polio research.

The Library also houses a collection of patient records on cerebrospinal meningitis amassed by the Rockefeller Institute, ca.1907-1913 (Ms. Coll. 34).

Indexing Terms

Corporate Name(s)

- Rockefeller Institute.

Genre(s)

- Medical records

Personal Name(s)

- Flexner, Simon, 1863-1946

Subject(s)

- Epidemics
- Epidemiology
- Nurses--New York (State)
- Poliomyelitis--New York (State)--New York
- Public health--New York (State)--New York

Bibliography

Rogers, Naomi, *Dirt and Disease: Polio Before FDR* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992). **Call no.:** 616.83
R63d

Series I. Cases with known source of infection

Collection Inventory

Series I. Cases with known source of infection	1916	5 linear feet
Cases: A-B	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 1
Cases: C-D	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 2
Cases: D-GI	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 3
Cases: Go-K	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 4
Cases: L-M	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 5
Cases: N-R	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 6
Cases: S-T	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 7
Cases: U-Z	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 8
"Source of infection established: Penumonia, diphtheria, food, out of town"	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 9
Miscellaneous: Summary report for the Health Dept.; 2. Chicken investigations; 3. Pets; 4. Institutions; 5. Ignorance of people; 6. Rat flea investigation; 7. Autopsies; 8. Fruit	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 10

Series II. Cases without known source of infectio...

Series II. Cases without known source of infection	1916	16.5 linear feet
Cases: A	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 11
Cases: A-Be	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 12
Cases: Be-Bo	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 13
Cases: Bo-Bu	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 14
Cases: Bu-Ce	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 15
Cases: Ch-Co	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 16
Cases: Co-Da	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 17
Cases: Da-Du	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 18
Cases: Du-Fe	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 19
Cases: Fe-Fr	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 20
Cases: Fr-Gl	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 21
Cases: Gl-Gu	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 22
Cases: Gu-He	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 23
Cases: He-Hu	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 24
Cases: Hu-J	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 25
Cases: K-Ke	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 26
Cases: Ke-Ku	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 27
Cases: Ku-Le	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 28
Cases: Le-Ly	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 29
Cases: Ma-Mac	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 30

Series II. Cases without known source of infectio...

Cases: Mac-Mi	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 31
Cases: Mi-Mu	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 32
Cases: Mu-Or	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 33
Cases: Or-Pi	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 34
Cases: Pl-Re	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 35
Cases: Re-Ru	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 36
Cases: Ru-Sc	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 37
Cases: Sc-Si	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 38
Cases: Si-St	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 39
Cases: St-Th	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 40
Cases: Th-V	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 41
Cases: W-Wh	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 42
Cases: Wh-Z	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 43

Series III. Miscellaneous

Series III. Miscellaneous	1916	3 linear feet
Special cases	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 44
Totals; miscellaneous cases, pneumonia, early polio cases	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 45
Miscellaneous files M-Z; nurse assignments; 1916 medical inspector assignments; census; food -- Bronx, Queens; Sanitation		0.5 linear feet Box 46
Notebooks kept by investigators	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 47
Miscellaneous records	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 48
Miscellaneous records	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 49

Series IV. Card files

Series IV. Card files	1916	5 linear feet
Index file: Report of nurses, A-H	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 50
Index file: Report of nurses, H-R	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 51
Index file: Report of nurses, S-Z	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 52
Card index to cases, A-Con	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 53
Card index to cases, Cos-Han	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 54
Card index to cases, Her-Mc	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 55
Card index , Hospital cases, A-Z	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 56
Data collected from experiments on monkeys infected with polio #1	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 57
Data collected from experiments on monkeys infected with polio #2	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 58
Data collected from experiments on monkeys infected with polio #3	1916	0.5 linear feet Box 59