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LORD BYRON (1788–1824) AS THE PRECURSOR OF CELEBRITIES ENDORSING VACCINE HESITANCY: A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL LESSON FOR COVID-19 IMMUNISATION STRATEGIES

ABSTRACT: Lord Byron can be classified as the prototype of contemporary celebrities endorsing pseudo-scientific views and opposing vaccination policies based on his public statements, while privately he appears to have had double standards since he had his page inoculated against smallpox. Through a review of the biomedical and historical literature this paper examines the role of the example given by celebrities during vaccination campaigns, focusing on the historical figure of Lord Byron. A reassessment of his writings on the topic of vaccination (cowpox inoculation) is then performed and put in the greater context of celebrities, past and present, commenting in favour or against immunisation policies. Byron's case demonstrates how health institutions should not underestimate the influence of 'VIPs' on the success of vaccinations, and should seek their help and positive example when trying to persuade the general population of the importance of vaccinations.

KEY WORDS: Vaccine - Prevention - COVID-19 - Jenner - Smallpox - Byron

Vaccine hesitancy is defined as the reluctance to being administered vaccinations or having one's child vaccinated against pathogens responsible for infectious diseases. Its global extent is considered a public health

threat, and has raised substantial concerns within the international scientific community (The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health 2019). Amongst the fears that prevent parents from embracing the usefulness of

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scientific advances the long-debunked myth of a correlation between the trivalent combined measles-mumps-rubella vaccine and autism is prominent (Davidson 2017). The risk of a 'post-vaccinal' world is appreciated by scholars working in the public health field, especially now, at a time when high expectations for the new COVID-19 vaccine are as high as they are met with scepticism by members of the public over its efficacy and safety (Harrison *et al.* 2020).

In this context, the role played by celebrities is under scrutiny in that, as a result of their overwhelming media and social media presence and favour, they can convey decisively important messages to the general public, which constitute a valuable support to the cause of prevention.

The capital role celebrities have had throughout history in influencing people's medical choices has been stressed, from the implementation of vaccinations ordered by statesmen such as George Washington (1732–1799) and Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), to contemporary stars like Elvis Aaron Presley (1935–1977) (Najera 2019, Galassi *et al.* 2021).

On the contrary, when celebrities publicly speak against vaccinations or support fake news about them, it can become problematic for public health authorities to deal with the side effects of such statements. This

was particularly clear in recent years when the celebrated Hollywood actor Robert De Niro (born 1943) expressed his concerns about the safety of vaccines and said about the pseudo-scientific documentary *Vaxxed* that 'the movie' was 'something that people should see' (Lee 2016) or, right in the midst of the present COVID-19 pandemic, when the Australian model and actress Elle Macpherson (born 1964) openly supported Andrew Wakefield (born 1957), whose 1998 study published in *The Lancet* was later retracted because it supported the undemonstrated correlation between autism and the MMR vaccine (Deer 2020).

Such a trend does not appear to be a new phenomenon since, as satirised by James Gillray (1756–1815) in his 1802 coloured etching *The Cow-Pock—or—the Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation!* (Isaacs 2019), (Figure 1) a tenacious opposition of vaccinations has always existed ever since the days of Edward Jenner (1749–1823), whose discovery – without forgetting earlier contributions by Dr John Fewster (1738–1824) – that by inoculating healthy individuals with the cowpox virus it was possible to make them develop immunity against the Variola virus, the aetiological agent of smallpox.

In particular, a notable case of endorsement of vaccine hesitancy has to be attributed to the poet,



FIGURE 1: James Gillray. *The Cow-Pock—or—the Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation!* From Wikipedia, public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Gillray#/media/File:The_cow_pock.jpg

politician and major exponent of the Romantic Age, George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron (also known as Lord Byron, 1788–1824, *Figure 2*), who had such views in his 1809 satirical poem *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, a scathing literary 'counter-attack' against Henry Peter Brougham's destructive review of Byron's 1807 work *Hours of Idleness*.

In it Byron writes (Byron GG., 1970):

Thus saith the Preacher: "Nought beneath the sun / Is new," yet still from change to change we run. / What varied wonders tempt us as they pass! / The Cow-pox, Tractors, Galvanism, and Gas, / In turns appear, to make the vulgar stare, / Till the swoln bubble bursts—and all is air!

Perkins's Patent Tractors were invented by the American physician Elisha Perkins (1741–1799) and consisted of two metallic rods with a pointed end which were applied to the body parts where patients reported pain and were considered to be capable of extracting electrical fluid that were responsible for the pain experienced by patients. This fraudulent device was brought to London by Elisha Perkins's son, Benjamin Douglas Perkins (1774–1810) (Lanska 2019).

Galvanism was the practice of inducing an electrical stimulation in the bodies of deceased individuals, such as executed convicts, of which its eponym's (i.e. Luigi Galvani, 1737–1798) nephew, Giovanni Aldini (1762–1834), gave a practical demonstration in London in 1803 (Aldini, 1803). Despite its limited outreach, this now long-forgotten 'science' paved the way for future neurophysiological studies and had an influence on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851)'s work *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

Sublimating gas probably meant the nitrous oxide studied by the chemist Humphry Davy (1778–1829) and Thomas Beddoes (1780–1808), a physician who advocated the inhalation of gases to treat respiratory conditions such as tuberculosis (Levere *et al.* 2016).

The fact that Byron puts the Jennerian inoculative revolution – albeit in its infancy – on a par with some well-known charlatan or at least highly controversial medical practices, clearly indicates the poet's most intimate views about vaccination, which he *de facto* considers a passing fancy (Oldstone 2020).

Byron's stance can be partly explained with his considering smallpox a lesser disease than the much greater 'pox', syphilis: *I said the small-pox has gone out of late; / Perhaps it may be follow'd by the great* (*Don Juan*, Canto I, CXXX, in BYRON, GG, MOORE, T., 1833), (Cochran 2014).

At the same time, Lord Byron seemed to have made a clear distinction between his philosophical position on cowpox inoculation and his practical realisation of its beneficial effects, considering that in 1808 he had his protégé Robert Rushton (ca. 1790–1827) inoculated: in a letter dated 16th January 1808 and sent to John C. Hobhouse (1786–1896) he wrote that 'Robert has recovered of the Cowpox, with which it pleased me to afflict him' [Byron to Hobhouse, from Newstead Abbey, January 16th 1808] – hence, something he saw as a harmful, yet necessary preventive measure.

Lord Byron's case clearly indicates how an improper and uninformed communication on vaccinal matters by celebrities, on account of their very fame, can generate confusion and a misunderstanding of crucial health policies. This proves particularly obnoxious and intellectually dishonest when such celebrities have double behavioural standards, separating their personal choices from the public communication of their views.

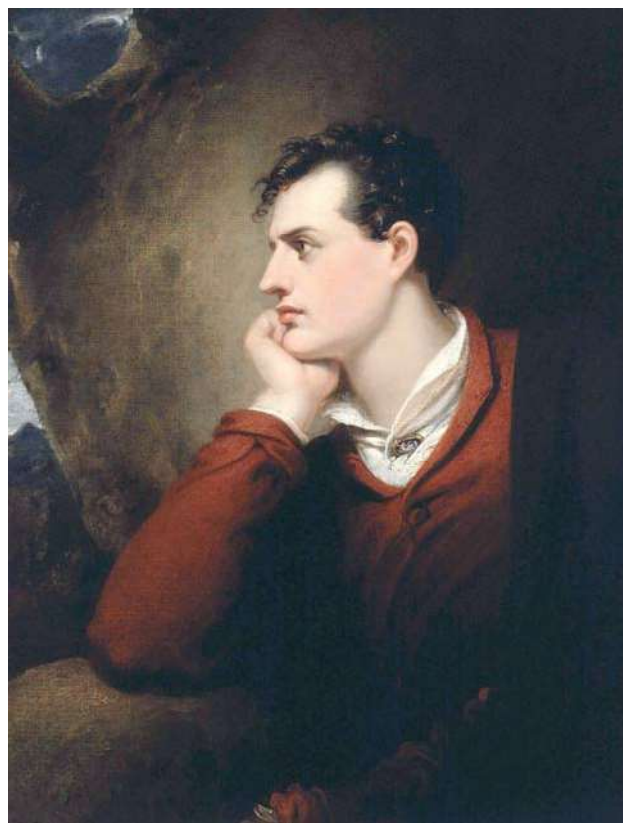


FIGURE 2: Portrait of Lord Byron by Richard Westall (1813). From Wikipedia, public domain: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Westall#/media/File:George_Gordon_Byron,_6th_Baron_Byron_by_Richard_Westall_\(2\).jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Westall#/media/File:George_Gordon_Byron,_6th_Baron_Byron_by_Richard_Westall_(2).jpg)

While we may pardon Byron's hurried dismissal of Jenner's cowpox inoculation because of the absolutely novelty of the practice – although variolation had long before been introduced in England from the Ottoman Empire by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) –, the scientific community should very carefully watch over controversial comments released by celebrities whose success can virally spread fake news the world over to the great detriment of public health. And, following in the footsteps of Richard H. Shryock (1893–1972), we may conclude by stressing how the history of medicine (hence also of preventive strategies) is not only a history of technical developments, but also an attempt at describing its evolution in the greater frame of a social history of mankind (Shryock 1936).

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