

HEALTH

How the CIA's Fake Vaccination Campaign Endangers Us All

The U.S. was wrong to use health workers to target Osama bin Laden

.....
May 1, 2013

Not long after midnight on May 2, 2011, U.S. Navy SEALs attacked a three-story compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, raced to the main building's top floor and killed Osama bin Laden. Few mourn the man responsible for the slaughter of many thousands of innocent people worldwide over the years. But the operation that led to his death may yet kill hundreds of thousands more. In its zeal to identify bin Laden or his family, the CIA used a sham hepatitis B vaccination project to collect DNA in the neighborhood where he was hiding. The effort apparently failed, but the violation of trust threatens to set back global public health efforts by decades.

It is hard enough to distribute, for example, polio vaccines to children in desperately poor, politically unstable regions that are rife with 10-year-old rumors that the medicine is a Western plot to sterilize girls—false assertions that have long since been repudiated by the Nigerian religious leaders who first promoted them. Now along come numerous credible reports of a vaccination campaign that *is* part of a CIA plot—

The deadly consequences have already begun. Villagers along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border chased off legitimate vaccine workers, accusing them of being spies. Taliban commanders banned polio vaccinations in parts of Pakistan, specifically citing the bin Laden attacks. In Pakistan, eventually prompting the United Nations to withdraw its vaccination teams. Two months later gunmen killed 10 polio workers in Nigeria—a sign that the violence against vaccinators may be spreading.

ADVERTISEMENT

Such attacks could not come at a worse time. The global polio campaign has entered what should be its final stages. The number of cases has dropped from 350,000 in 1988 to 650 in 2011. The disease spreads naturally in only three countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria—down from more than 125 countries a quarter of a century ago. Disrupting or postponing vaccination efforts could fan a resurgence of polio around the world.

The distrust sowed by the sham campaign in Pakistan could conceivably postpone polio eradication for 20 years, leading to 100,000 more cases that might otherwise not have occurred, says Leslie F. Roberts of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. “Forevermore, people would say this disease, this crippled child is because the U.S. was so crazy to get Osama bin Laden,” he argues.

The vaccination ruse also poses a moral problem. Physicians take a Hippocratic oath to do no harm. Humanitarian workers adhere to an international code of conduct that

Support science journalism.

national agendas, on the basis of need alone. The misguided vaccine program in Pakistan was started in a poor neighborhood of Abbottabad, no doubt to give it an air of legitimacy. Yet after the first in a standard series of three hepatitis B shots was given to bin Laden's wealthier community. This lapse in protocol proves that the best interests of the recipients were not the guiding principle of the effort—while not coincidentally betraying the program for the sham it was.

There must be a red line drawn between humanitarian efforts and the machinations of warfare, no matter how unconventional. The costs to future humanitarian endeavors, global stability and U.S. national security of doing otherwise are too high—even when weighed against the liquidation of one of the U.S.'s most fearsome enemies and even if no other option is available. As outlined in a letter signed by the deans of a dozen prominent schools of public health that was sent to the White House, President Barack Obama should direct all U.S. military and intelligence agencies to refrain from using a medical or humanitarian cover to achieve their objectives. Such efforts are bad medicine and bad spy craft. A wise leader would disavow them.

This article was originally published with the title "The Spies Who Sabotaged Global Health" in Scientific American 308, 5, 12 (May 2013)
doi:10.1038/scientificamerican0513-12

[Rights & Permissions](#)

READ THIS NEXT

Support science journalism.

The Supreme Court Could Block Climate Change Protections

Rachel Cleetus | Opinion

Thanks for reading Scientific American. Knowledge awaits.

NEUROSCIENCE

How the Brain Curbs Overconfidence

Diana Kwon

[See Subscription Options](#)

Already a subscriber? [Sign in.](#)

COGNITION

People Who Jump to Conclusions Show Other Kinds of Thinking Errors

Carmen Sanchez and David Dunning

POLITICS

Ukrainian Scientists Fear for their Lives and Future Amid Russian Threat

Holly Else, Nisha Gaiind and Nature magazine

CLIMATE CHANGE

White House Predicts Major Delays to Climate Rules After Court Nixes Carbon Metric

Niina H. Farah, Heather Richards and E&E News

INEQUALITY

Vaccine Inequality Has Shut Vulnerable People Out of Plans to Save the Planet

Nnimmo Bassey



IN THE STORE

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

Scientific American Volume 308, Issue 5

\$ 5.99

Support science journalism.

Get smart. Sign up for our email
Thanks for reading Scientific American. Knowledge
newsletter.
awaits.

[See Subscription Options](#)

Already a subscriber? [Sign in.](#)

Support Science Journalism

[Subscribe Now!](#)

FOLLOW US

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN ARABIC

العربية

[Return & Refund Policy](#)

[FAQs](#)

[About](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Press Room](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[SA Custom Media](#)

[California Consumer Privacy Statement](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Use of cookies/Do not sell my data](#)

Support science journalism.

Scientific American is part of Springer Nature, which owns or has commercial relations with thousands of scientific publications (many of them can be found at www.springernature.com/us).
Scientific American maintains a strict policy of editorial independence, reporting what it finds in science to our readers.

Thanks for reading Scientific American. Knowledge awaits.

© 2022 SCIENTIFIC

[See Subscription Options](#)

RE AMERICA, INC.

Already a subscriber? [Sign in.](#)

Support science journalism.