

The Faculty of Public Health Medicine, and The History of Medicine Section of RAMI

Plagues and Imperialism: the Birth of Clinical Trials in Late 19th Century India

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Royal College of Physicians of Ireland,

6 Kildare Street, Dublin 2



Dr Simonds injecting plague serum, 1897



Anti-Cholera inoculation in Calcutta



Dr Haffkine inoculating Bengali children, 1896

Before RCTs a longer tradition of conscious attempts to obtain unbiased evidence of treatment and prevention efficacy involved alternate allocation – when every second patient is provided with active treatment. Studies using this approach were introduced in late 19th century Imperial India, initially for cholera vaccination in prisons. Waldemar Haffkine, an émigré Russian Jew, following political and religious persecution, developed the vaccine in the Pasteur Institute. Plague arrived in India, and Haffkine tested both vaccination to prevent, and serum treatment of, this disease. Trials by Haffkine and others continued in prisons, other institutions and hospitals, against a background of riots and civil unrest. Putative reasons for the rise and fall of alternate allocation trials will be presented.

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