Illness, birth defects, and religious beliefs in colonial America

One of the nice things about studying American history is we can gain a greater appreciation for some of the fundamental truths we take for granted today, especially those related to illness, childbirth, and religious freedom. So let’s return to colonial America and focus in on some of the difficulties those incredibly brave folks encountered.

On November 9, 1620, the Mayflower, with 103 Pilgrims (69 adults and 34 children) aboard, anchored off Cape Cod after a rough voyage of 67 days. Eighteen days later, Mistress White gave birth to a son, named Peregrine, the first English child born in New England. Amazingly enough, he lived to be 83 years old.

Another child was born on the Mayflower on December 22, 1620, while the ship was still anchored in Plymouth Harbor. The stillborn boy was delivered to Isaac and Mary Allerton. Unfortunately, Mrs. Allerton died on the Mayflower several days later at the height of a winter storm.

There was very little illness, other than seasickness, during the long and arduous trip over from England. But soon after docking off Cape Cod, sickness and death started to set in, brought on by months of poor diet, cramped and unsanitary quarters, exposure to the elements, and overexertion in all kinds of weather. Living on salt meat and ship’s biscuits, the colonists started dying like flies.
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When the worst was over, only 54 persons were left after the first winter, 21 of them were under the age of 16.

Anne Hutchinson was the best known of the early colonial midwives. She and her husband and their many children came from England to Boston in 1634. At the time she was 43 years old and was known “as a woman who could be very helpful in times of childbirth, and other occasions of bodily infirmities.” She was also outspoken about her religious beliefs. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hutchinson was excommunicated and banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638, in part because her religious beliefs did not agree with those of her more established neighbors.

Before she was banished, Anne Hutchinson had the misfortune of being in attendance when her friend Mary Dyer gave birth to a stillborn baby with anencephaly. Her superstitious neighbors had all sorts of questions about what caused the “monstrous infant.” The civil and religious authorities saw it as a sign of God’s condemnation of Mary Dyer for having been a follower of Anne Hutchinson’s teachings.

Now, most of us are familiar with the concept of a neural tube defect. The neural tube that forms very early in pregnancy is the forerunner of the spinal cord and brain.

If you run your finger from the base of your spine straight up the middle of your back, and extend the line up the middle of your neck, across the middle of your skull to your forehead, that line represents the closed neural tube.
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the neural tube closes by the 28th day after conception, before most women realize they are pregnant. But if anywhere along that line, the neural tube fails to close by the 28th day, a neural tube defect results.

Most neural tube defects occur in the lower back during fetal development. These are often called open spine defects, or spina bifida. But some also occur at the top of the neural tube where the brain and skull normally form, leaving the developing brain exposed through the open skull.

This open skull defect is called anencephaly, which is incompatible with survival. The sight of such a baby at birth can be quite a shock.

Back in the 1600s, the pilgrims knew nothing of what we have just discussed. Obviously, Mary Dyer and Anne Hutchinson’s religious beliefs, or Mrs. Hutchinson’s skills as a midwife had nothing to do with Mary conceiving and giving birth to a child with anencephaly. Nevertheless, Mary Dyer and Anne Hutchinson were banished to Rhode Island, a state founded on the principle of religious tolerance.

Twenty-one years later, Mary Dyer returned to Boston, where she was once again a victim of religious persecution. She was executed as a Quaker on Boston Common on June 1, 1660.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hutchinson had died in 1643 when she and her family were massacred in New York by Indians. However, one daughter, Susanna, was taken
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captive (some say because she had red hair, which intrigued the Indians) and ransomed back to relatives several years later.

Our 17th century ancestors believed God created illness and birth defects to punish us for disobeying His laws. The birth of a child with congenital anomalies could get you banished or even put to death.

A further thought: In 1987, Governor Michael Dukakis pardoned Anne Hutchinson, revoking the order of banishment by Governor Winthrop 350 years earlier. A statue of Anne Hutchinson with her daughter Susanna as a child stands in front of the State House in Boston.

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