

Vaccination — Uspeq

CUUMI USPERTAQAIT. – THEY USED TO GIVE US VACCINATIONS.



Photo: Laura Counciller receives a vaccination. Photo courtesy of the Counciller family.

Vaccinations may seem like a feat of twentieth-century bioengineering, but they have a long history in Europe and even Alaska. The world's first vaccines became available after 1796 when British physician Edward Jenner used cowpox to develop an immunization for smallpox. Russian authorities recognized the importance of Jenner's invention, and by the early decades of the nineteenth century, they widely vaccinated their citizens against smallpox. Vaccination spread east with the Russian fur trade, arriving in Alaska by at least 1805.

Russian Orthodox priests were often trained to give vaccinations, and vaccinations were routinely given to Alaska Natives sent to Russia to study. Other Native people, particularly those living close to Russian posts, received vaccinations from Russian American Company officials as part of local health care efforts.

Despite efforts to protect people from smallpox, early vaccination programs were not always successful. Vaccines were in short supply and not always reliable. They had to be shipped great distances to reach Alaska and sometimes lost their potency during travel. Additionally, Native people were often reluctant to be vaccinated. To ease their concerns, the Russians trained Native people to give vaccinations. In the fall of 1828, an Alutiiq man traveled to Kodiak's rural communities providing inoculations. Tragically, however, vaccination did not reach far enough into the Kodiak Alutiiq population, and the 1837 smallpox epidemic had a devastating impact. Nearly five hundred people died in just six months.