"Safe, effective, and potent." Conquering Polio at the University of Michigan School of Public Health

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The story of the eradication of polio in the United States is well known. However, the role played by the University of Michigan School of Public Health (UMSPH) is not as familiar. This poster highlights the achievements of the UMSPH in carrying out one of the most successful vaccination campaigns in history, which eventually led to the conquest of polio.

The 1954 Field Trial

In 1954, the U.S. Vaccine Advisory Committee approved a field test of Dr. Jonas Salk’s polio vaccine. The trials, which were among the largest and most publicised clinical trials ever undertaken, were sponsored by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (March of Dimes).

Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Francis, Salk’s mentor during a fellowship at UMSPH, the massive controlled field trial was launched. Almost two million children in the United States, between ages of six and nine, participated.

The 1955 Polio Vaccine Trial Announcement

On April 12, 1955, in the University of Michigan’s Rackham Auditorium, Dr. Thomas Francis Jr., director of the Poliomyelitis Vaccine Evaluation Center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, announced to the world that the Salk polio vaccine was up to 90% effective in preventing paralytic polio.

For parents, the Salk vaccine was a godsend, with active polio cases plummeting by almost 90 percent in the first two years following its introduction. Polio has now been virtually eradicated in countries using Salk’s vaccine. The Salk polio vaccine transformed a disease that once horrified America into a memory.