



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT

27 April 2015

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Who decides how “safe” is “safe”? The pertussis vaccine scare and the Vaccination Damage Payments Act 1979

Weeks before the 1979 General Election was called, the Labour government passed an Act to provide payments to parents whose children had been damaged by vaccinations given under the state’s public health programmes. This had followed the ‘pertussis vaccine scare’, in which the whooping cough vaccine had been linked to brain injuries in children. By the early 1980s, the medical community was again broadly united in declaring the vaccination “safe” – but in the meantime, enough doubt had been sowed in the general public to cause vaccination rates to plummet. Coming off the back of the high-profile thalidomide scandal, Parliament, the press and pressure groups were open to idea that the medical community may have allowed a dangerous drug to be administered to millions of British children. Yet very little has been written about the Act itself.

Voluntary organisations were at the heart of this debate. This paper examines how the government responded in particular to the Association of Parents of Vaccine Damaged Children, placing it in the context of the wider disability movement in the 1970s. It draws out a number of themes, including the tensions between medical and social definitions of disability, questioning scientific authority, individual versus collective rights and growing concerns over the measurement and management of risk within the British welfare state.