



Canada's National Immunization Awareness Week

When Immunize Canada launched National Immunization Awareness Week in the 1990s, it echoed a very successful program that Canada saw in the 1930s. Back then, vaccines were new, and the diseases they prevent were far too common.

Details can be found in back issues of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, the long-running journal of the Canadian Public Health Association.

One of the earliest campaigns, launched in 1931, was Toronto's Toxoid Week, which focused on diphtheria. Toxoid Week became a stronger initiative after the establishment of the Health League of Canada in 1935. Largely spearheaded by the now-defunct League, the campaign involved schools, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, service clubs, and physicians to get the message out.

In 1942, it was decided that more diseases needed to be included, and the first National Immunization Week was born: a "coast-to-coast program of education directed towards the prevention of smallpox and whooping cough as well as diphtheria"¹.

Much has changed in Canada since the 1930s. In the mid-1970s, the Health League closed its doors. By then, immunization was common, and several important diseases were fading from memory. In the meantime, new vaccines were developed and are widely used. Smallpox – once a health threat worldwide – was eradicated. Canada was certified polio-free in 1994. Many lives have been saved by immunization, and countless illnesses and long-term health problems avoided. Vaccines truly are one of the great public health achievements of the twentieth century – and onward into the twenty-first.

But some things don't change. Vaccine-preventable diseases are still very much with us. We need to continue to educate Canadians about immunization and promote awareness of its benefits to health with up-to-date information. We need to involve traditional media, health care providers, and social media. And we need to keep vaccinating! Recent outbreaks of mumps and measles remind us that, if immunization rates drop, diseases will reappear. Immunization rates must remain high in order for individuals and communities to stay protected against vaccine-preventable diseases.

National Immunization Awareness Week is a great time to learn more. Visit immunize.ca for reliable information on immunization for all generations.

References

¹ National Immunization Week: November 14 – 21. *Can Public Health J* 1943:34(10):477. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41978506> (Accessed April 13, 2017).

Bates G. Diphtheria-Toxoid Week in Toronto. *Can Public Health J* 1938;29(12):578-82. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41977695> (Accessed March 14, 2017).