

THE SAD AND TRAGIC LIFE OF TYPHOID MARY

Janet Brooks

In Brief • En bref

As society grapples with contemporary moral questions raised by the barring of HIV-infected people from jobs and even crossing some national borders, it is probably useful to re-examine the case of Typhoid Mary. The case of Mary Mallon shows how an earlier age resolved the conflict that arises when society's right to protect itself from unnecessary exposure to disease impinges on the liberty of individual citizens.

Au moment où la société est aux prises avec des questions morales d'actualité soulevées par le fait qu'on interdit à des personnes infectées par le VIH d'occuper des emplois et même de franchir les frontières de certains pays, il est probablement utile de réexaminer le cas de «Typhoid Mary». L'affaire Mary Mallon démontre comment on a déjà réglé le conflit qui se pose lorsque le droit de la société de se protéger contre une exposition inutile à la maladie empiète sur la liberté de certaines personnes.

All Mary Mallon ever wanted to be was a good plain cook. Yet one wintry New York afternoon in 1907, she found herself bundled against her will into the back of a city ambulance and, subdued only by the weight of the female doctor sitting on top of her, removed from her employer's Park Avenue home.

History's most infamous typhoid carrier had just been contained. Even though she had committed no crime, Mary Mallon's life as a free woman was essentially over; turn-of-the-century health officials didn't have to worry about warnings, warrants or overly litigious lawyers.

As society grapples with contemporary moral questions raised by the barring of HIV-infected people from

schools, jobs, the military, professional basketball leagues and even crossing some national borders, it is probably useful to re-examine the case of Typhoid Mary, as Mallon was soon labelled. Her case shows how an earlier age resolved the conflict that arises when society's right to protect itself from unnecessary exposure to disease impinges on the liberty of individual citizens. There was never any doubt in Mary Mallon's mind that her life and liberty were unjustly sacrificed to a questionable greater good.

In the summer of 1906, before the world had heard of Typhoid Mary, the disease struck a home in Oyster Bay on Long Island's north shore. It had been rented by New York banker William Henry Warren.

Among the four family members and seven servants living in the house,

six came down with the high and extended fever characteristic of typhoid. Before the arrival of antibiotics, the mortality rate was at least 10%.

Typhoid fever was first identified early in the 19th century, but it wasn't until the 1880s that *Salmonella typhi* was isolated. The bacteria was spread mainly by contaminated drinking water, and the incidence of typhoid fever decreased as clean water became more widely available. Still, in 1900 the fever claimed the lives of 20 000 Americans, often striking groups of people in a single location even though the drinking water was known to be pure.

When Long Island public-health officials failed to identify the cause of the Oyster Bay outbreak, the owner of the house, concerned that no one would rent it again, hired sanitary engineer George Soper of New York's Department of Health to investigate.

The servants were Soper's prime suspects, and particularly the cook. Mary Mallon had started working for the Warren family just 3 weeks before the first member of the household became ill, and 3 weeks is the average incubation period for typhoid.

When Soper checked files at the New York domestic-service agency where the cook had been hired, he found that typhoid had struck most of the homes where she had previously been employed shortly after her arrival. Two cases had already been reported at the house on Park

Janet Brooks is a Canadian freelance writer living in Hong Kong.

The authorities offered to release Mallon if she would agree to give up professional cooking or have her gall bladder removed, since it was believed to be the site of her chronic infection. She rejected both offers, and denied that she was responsible for anyone's sickness or death. She refused to recognize the authority of science or government to label her a menace to society.

Avenue where she was currently working.

Of course, Mallon wasn't sick. But Soper knew that scientists in the budding field of epidemiology were beginning to suspect that some people who were themselves healthy could be chronic carriers of disease, displaying no symptoms but shedding bacteria constantly.

Soper went to see Mallon, then about 40, although she never disclosed her age, background or medical situation. If when Soper appeared on her doorstep she had quietly acquiesced, acknowledged that her cooking career was over and agreed to find another line of work, she probably would never have achieved immortality. Instead, when Soper explained his findings, offered free medical care and asked her to submit samples for testing, Mary Mallon picked up a rolling pin and chased him out of her kitchen.

Perhaps Mallon couldn't bear to hear Soper's message. She was an intelligent woman who read the *New York Times* and Charles Dickens for pleasure, and must have wondered why this awful disease kept following her from job to job. She never stayed at any position long. Although the epithet "Typhoid Mary" came to connote an uncaring disease spreader, Mallon often stayed to nurse the stricken before moving on. One employer awarded her an extra month's pay for her sickroom efforts.

Soper informed the Board of Health of his suspicions about Mallon, and it sent an ambulance con-

taining two interns, three policemen and Dr. Josephine Baker to the house on Park Avenue. As soon as she opened the door, Mallon knew that they had come for her. She fled out a back entrance to a neighbour's house, where the police located her after a 3-hour search.

"She fought and struggled and cursed," said Baker, who eventually sat on Mallon to control her. "I told the policeman to pick her up and put her in the ambulance. This we did, and the ride down to the hospital was a wild one."

At the Willard Parker Hospital, it was confirmed that Mallon was shedding *Salmonella typhi*; she was the first healthy carrier of the bacteria to be identified in North America. She had infected 22 people, including a little girl who died.

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Since she would not cooperate, officials quarantined Typhoid Mary — by now the press had given her that name — in what would become her permanent home, a one-room bungalow on the grounds of the Riverside Hospital for Communicable Diseases, located on remote North Brother Island in the East River.

"I never had typhoid in my life, and have always been healthy," Mallon told one reporter. "Why should I be banished like a leper and compelled to live in solitary confinement with only a dog for a companion?"

After spending 2 years alone in her bungalow, Mallon filed a writ of habeas corpus to secure her release. Her lawyer's argument that she had never been sick and could not therefore be a menace to society was rejected by the judge. He voiced sympathy, but sent her back to North Brother Island.

A year later, a new health commissioner agreed to release her if she promised not to cook again. She failed to keep her word, but managed to elude authorities for 5 years. In 1915, she was found cooking at the Sloan Maternity Hospital in New York City, where 25 new cases of typhoid fever had recently been reported.

Mallon was sent back to her bungalow on North Brother Island, where she spent the rest of her life. She died on Nov. 11, 1938, after more than 26 years of enforced isolation. In the end, she had passed the disease on to at least 51 people, 3 of whom died.

By the time she died New York health officials had identified more than 400 other healthy carriers of *Salmonella typhi*, but no one else was forcibly confined.

Mary Mallon's intransigence had temporarily made society's right to protect itself more important than the liberty of one person. ■