From the 1850s, smallpox vaccination was among the most ‘wilful’ acts hitherto required by the British state of all subjects. Indirect tax-paying, its main lifeblood, was no more than marginally voluntary. Unlike many Continental equivalents, the state required no residential registration nor, for males, compulsory military service if we exclude the part-time and far from universal militia and, into the Napoleonic wars, press-ganging near the coast. Other intrusions were partial, such as tithes, or rare, such as jury service. Yet, from 1853, all babies in England or Wales were to be vaccinated, usually by the officially recommended method of arm-to-arm, within three months of birth. This was earlier than in Scotland or Ireland, let alone in most Continental countries. Exactly seven days after the operation, every ‘vaccinee’ was to be presented for possible extraction of the resultant ‘lymph’, i.e. vaccine, for vaccinating the next batch: to become, in the jargon, a possible ‘vaccinifer’.

The point, here, is not to go over yet again the chronology of vaccinal legislation and resistance with its climax in loosenings of compulsion in 1898 and 1907, nor over the mid and late nineteenth-century increase of state intervention in subjects’ lives, nor over the professionalization of medicine, a process often denounced by its opponents as a conspiracy to monopolize, even to pervert, knowledge. Rather, the point is to examine how stunted vaccination’s mediation was by pro-vaccinists’ disdain for the ‘poor’ majority of parents. How deeply did the latter lack ‘intelligence’? At the time, this concept was deployed more frequently in debates as to when or whether some or all working-class males should be given the right to vote, lest they win it for themselves. Both discourses, vaccinal and political, were ultimately about the human validity of the majority of one’s fellow-Britons.
We can at once observe some curious results for the mediation of matters vaccinal. Upholders of vaccination sometimes discussed their problems as if their journals were internal memoranda. ‘A death from [blood-poisoning ‘from vaccination’] occurred not long ago in my practice’, the Medical Officer of Health for Aston, Birmingham, Henry May, confessed during the winter of 1873–4 to his local Medical Society, ‘and although I had not vaccinated the child, yet in my desire to preserve vaccination from reproach, I omitted all mention of it in my certificate of death’. As he had reasoned a few lines earlier in his speech, ‘it … [was] scarcely to be expected that a medical man will give opinions which may reflect upon himself in any way’. ‘In such doubtful cases [a responsible medicator would] most likely tell the truth, but not the whole truth, and assign some prominent symptom of the disease as the cause of death.’

May would have disagreed with our word ‘confess’: he surely knew that his more or less routine address would, like others to this particular Society, be printed in the *Birmingham Medical Review*. Thus the wonder is that he behaved as if his words would circulate exclusively among the like-minded and confidential, despite encapsulating what anti-vaccinators (henceforth, ‘antis’) had long been saying: that many medicators tried to hide the potentially lethal effects of vaccination. ‘Antis’ greeted May as letting the cat out of the bag; so they made sure that its screeches echoed for decades. They welcomed similarly his expression of trepidation that Parliament might soon try to force medicators to state causes of death ‘truly’.

Nor was he unique. Six years earlier, one prominent West Country surgeon had, unlike May, seen himself as a whistleblower. Robert Brudenell Carter, a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, had certainly chosen a far more conspicuous stadium, the *Lancet*, to complain of ‘a sort of common consent among medical writers to gloss over the evils that may be attendant on vaccination, for the sake of its great and manifold benefits’. ‘Gloss[ing] over’ was surely a hard charge to disprove without appearing to exemplify it. Yet the *Lancet*’s editors, like their *Birmingham* counterparts, saw fit to print such accusations. We will view some further own-goals (as they became) from the orthodox later, underlining how peculiarly fraught the vaccinal area was for any ‘mediation’ from orthodox medicators to any class of laypeople. Worse from any orthodox viewpoint, we shall soon see the ‘knowledgeable’ receiving, over the decades, as many unwelcome lessons as the ‘antis’.

Editors and many contributors to the medical press often behaved as if every ‘anti’ were illiterate or penniless or both: to be ignored anyway.