

The Cutter incident, 1955

[\[back\] Vaccine Disasters](#)

"On June 23rd, 1955 the American Public Health Service announced that there had been 149 confirmed cases of poliomyelitis among the vaccinated, with six deaths, and 149 cases among the contacts of children given the Salk vaccine, with six deaths."--
[M. BEDDOW BAYLY, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P.](#)

In 1954 Eddy was fifty-one years old. Born in a mining town in West Virginia, she got a Ph.D. in 1927 from the University of Cincinnati and came to Washington during the Great Depression to work at the Hygienic Laboratory, as she continued to call it. Her job from then until she retired in 1973 was the safety testing of vaccines.

In 1954 the rush was on. Her lab had gotten samples of the inactivated polio vaccine to certify on a "due-yesterday" basis. "This was a product that had never been made before and they were going to use it right away," she recalled. She and her staff worked around the clock. "We had eighteen monkeys. We inoculated these eighteen monkeys with each vaccine that came in. And we started getting paralyzed monkeys." She reported to her superiors that the lots were Cutter's, and sent pictures of the paralyzed monkeys along as well. "They were going to be injecting this thing into children."

William Sebrell, the director of the NIH, stopped by the animal house where they were working, not to thank her for blowing the whistle but to ask if she and her co-workers wanted their children immunized with the vaccine, as it was in short supply. "I thanked him but said that my children had escaped polio so far and that I preferred to wait until the testing program was over before having them immunized," said Eddy. "Everyone there turned down the offer."

She heard nothing more about her report and never got the photographs back. "They went ahead and released the vaccine anyway, a lot of it. The monkeys they just disregarded." [\[Book extract. The Health Century\] Dr. Bernice E. Eddy, whose lab tests found that the Cutter vaccine had been improperly inactivated.](#)

See: [Dr. Bernice E. Eddy](#)