

John Snow, hero of cholera: RIP

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Dr. John Snow is not the first man to be honoured for valorous acts he never accomplished, nor is he the first to have honest, partially successful work transformed into a miraculous success. On the 200th anniversary of Snow's death it is time to acknowledge the glorious failure to accept that Snow's cholera studies were not good enough.

The problem is not Snow, but the mythology that has grown around him, the fable of the heroic researcher who single-handedly "proved" cholera was waterborne. He did not. Here is the myth broken down into its components.

Myth 1: Snow developed the idea of inscribing individual cases in maps that would argue the nature, origin and source of a disease outbreak. In fact, the first "spot-map" of a disease outbreak arguing etiology was created by Valentine Seaman in 1798 in a study of a New York City outbreak of yellow fever.¹ By the 1830s disease maps had become a common instrument of epidemiological study.

Myth 2: Snow single-handedly pioneered the "shoe-leather epidemiology" of local case studies. Again, Seaman's study, and other studies of yellow fever and cholera, used this type of case analysis.

Myth 3: Snow's data were individually generated. In fact, the case reports he investigated and mapped were derived from weekly mortality reports issued by the General Registrar Office in London, England. Most of his cases came from local physicians and the local parish curate, Rev. Henry Whitehead, who visited every family in the area of the Broad Street outbreak.

Myth 4: Snow's South London study was a success. It failed because Snow was unable to organize a street-level

