



## Parsing the peanut panic: The social life of a contested food allergy epidemic



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### ABSTRACT

As medical reports over the last decade indicate that food allergies among children are on the rise, peanut allergies in particular have become a topic of intense social debate. While peanut allergies are potentially fatal, they affect very few children at the population level. Yet, peanut allergies are characterized in medical and popular literature as a rising “epidemic,” and myriad and broad-based social responses have emerged to address peanut allergy risk in public spaces. This analysis compares medical literature to other textual sources, including media reports, legislation, and advocacy between 1980 and 2010 in order to examine how peanut allergies transformed from a rare medical malady into a contemporary public health problem. I argue that the peanut allergy epidemic was co-constructed through interactions between experts, publics, biomedical categories, and institutions, while social reactions to the putative epidemic expanded the sphere of surveillance and awareness of peanut allergy risk. The characterization of the peanut allergy problem as an epidemic was shaped by mobility across social sites, with both discursive and material effects.

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### Introduction

Peanut allergies represent charged terrain in medicine and in society. Deemed a population epidemic by some physicians and a case of population hysteria by others, peanut allergies have become the focus of much social activity and controversy. For instance, during the last decade, schools have banned peanut butter, segregated lunch tables based on the presence of peanuts, and evacuated school areas when peanuts have been found (Christakis, 2008; Kalb, 2007). This so-called peanut panic occurs in many educational or day care settings (Kilanowski, Stalter, & Gottesman, 2006) and has even extended to higher education in the form of nut-free dormitories (Ahmed, 2008). Airlines and baseball parks have instituted peanut-free zones; and, since legislation in the early 2000s, we can reliably expect in the U.S. to ascertain whether a processed food product came into contact with peanuts during manufacture, or whether it contains peanuts, by reading package labels. Signage indicating the same is now regularly posted in food vending spaces.

Peanut allergies are commonly referred to as an “epidemic.” A simple review of media headlines and medical titles over the past decade impresses the point that the population suffering from a peanut allergy has expanded. Contemporary books and articles aim

to alert lay readers to the idea that an allergy to the peanut (a legume, not a nut) is indeed a troubling epidemic (Fraser, 2011), highlighting the vexing nature of its rise as a medical and public problem (Groopman, 2011). Yet, how big is the problem?

The U.S. National Center for Health Statistics states that the prevalence of reported food allergies among children rose 18% from 1997 to 2007 and that currently four out of every hundred children have a food allergy (Branum & Lukacs, 2008). Medical experts claim that cases of peanut allergies, in particular, doubled among children around the turn of the twenty-first century (Sicherer, Munoz-Furlong, & Sampson, 2003). However, the peanut allergy affects, at maximum estimates, a little over 1% of children in North America and the U.K. (Ben-Shoshan et al., 2010; Sicherer & Sampson, 2007). Children often outgrow other types of food allergies, but the peanut allergy appears to remain more stable and more severe than other food allergies (Sicherer & Sampson, 2010). Furthermore, although peanut allergies are not medically-contested in their extreme, or “true,” form (an IgE-mediated allergic, or anaphylactic, reaction is a clear immunologic response that can lead to shock, difficulty in breathing, or death without an injection of epinephrine, or adrenaline), it is difficult to diagnose a true allergy, and this is something the medical establishment has wrestled with since the peanut allergy phenomenon began its rise.

Undoubtedly, people with peanut allergies or sensitivities have long existed; yet, the peanut allergy did not comprise a pronounced medical research agenda prior to the 1980s, nor did it appear in

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media headlines with much frequency. At that time, an allergy to peanuts was considered a rare malady and presumably not infused with as much social meaning as it is today. Some medical and cultural commentators call the current public responses to peanut allergies unnecessary and overstated (Broussard, 2008; Sanghavi, 2006), suggesting a case of “otherwise healthy people in a cascade of anxiety” (Christakis, 2008: a2880).

This paper examines how a scarce illness became considered a conspicuous public problem, even an epidemic, and the ways in which this process inflected the tenor of social responses to peanut allergies. I look at medical literature on, and social responses to, peanut allergies both before and after they were considered a significant public health issue. By using the characterization of the peanut allergy “epidemic” as an analytic pivot point, I examine the aggregation and deployment of new ideas about an emergent health and social problem. By also analyzing the social activity around the emergence of the peanut allergy as an epidemic phenomenon, I show how reactions to this putative epidemic expanded the sphere of surveillance and awareness of peanut allergy risk.

### New epidemics and the production of social order

Health fears in developed countries now focus more on chronic disease than on infectious disease (Rosenberg, 2009). While health epidemics are still usually thought of in terms of contagious diseases, scholars have recently paid close attention to the social rise of non-communicable chronic diseases deemed “epidemics,” such as autism, obesity, or breast cancer (see, e.g., Eyal, Hart, Onculer, Oren, & Rossi, 2010; King & Bearman, 2011; Lantz & Booth, 1998; Paradis, Albert, Byrne, & Kuper, n.d.; Saguy & Almeling, 2008).

Paradis et al., in their analysis of the use of “epidemic” in the medical literature, reveal an “epidemic of epidemics” during the second half of the twentieth century; they argue that the invocation of the term “epidemic” has, over time, served as a rhetorical strategy to unearth symbolic struggles over disease attention (Paradis et al., n.d.). Boero (2007) uses the term “post-modern epidemics” for contemporary medicalized phenomena that take on monikers of more “traditional epidemics;” as Rosenberg (1992: 278) writes, the term “epidemic” is today used in a multiplicity of ways, often in a metaphorical manner, “moving it further and further from its emotional roots in specific past events.”

Much of this literature on the “new epidemics” focuses on the emergence of new disease categories and how classificatory schema are entrenched in institutional and methodological decisions about relevant criteria and diagnoses. In this paper, I take these insights from the history and sociology of medicine and blend them with the rich literature in science and technology studies (STS) that focuses on the complex interactions among experts, institutions, publics, and other entities in the emergence of novel disease categories and spheres of social awareness and surveillance. Taking such a theoretical and methodological approach can shed light on the social processes at play in the emergence of new epidemics, as these epidemics may reflect an intricate social course by which a disease classification emerges within an interactive relationship among medical categories, people, institutions, knowledge, and experts (Hacking, 1999; 2007). The creation of knowledge about epidemiology and the creation of new social practices in conjunction with this new knowledge may be seen as co-producing (Jasanoff, 2004) or co-constructing (Taylor, 1995) science and social order. How experts and publics interact vis-à-vis this new knowledge, and how scientific knowledge percolates in the public arena, is also of critical importance in the social life of new diseases or conditions that impact public health (Epstein, 1996; Wynne, 1996; Yearley, 1999). Scholars have shown that whenever new population health

imperatives emerge, there are credibility struggles that permeate science and the public (e.g., Epstein, 1996; Hilgartner, 2000). As new ways of positioning and classifying diseases matter for what we come to know as “normal” (Bowker & Star, 1999: 326), there are potential material effects of the ways in which social processes, social practices, and disease categories interact.

Meanwhile, several social scientists have paid express attention to the analytical leverage provided by empirical analyses of food allergies. Nettleton, Woods, Burrows, and Kerr (2009) call for a sociological agenda with reference to food allergies and note that while the epidemiology concerning food allergies is contested, “what is certain is that there is growing media, public, scientific, commercial and policy interest in food allergies and food intolerance” (2009: 648). Due to the debatable, and thus socially contingent, definitions and categories with regard to food allergies, in addition to the myriad social responses to them (Nettleton et al., 2009) and lack of etiologic understanding of them, a high level of uncertainty surrounds contemporary food allergies, in general, and peanut allergies in particular (Lauritzen, 2004; Pansare & Kamat, 2009).

One of the only sociological examinations of the rise of peanut allergies focuses on new regulatory measures in Canadian schools that have resulted in a type of morality governance invading the public space of the school system (Rous & Hunt, 2004). More empirical and comprehensive work is necessary to unpack the social problem of peanut allergies. In this article, I am interested in examining how a relatively rare ailment emerged as a conspicuous public problem and how it sparked such social responses in the first place. In doing so, I will highlight the evolution in characterization of the peanut allergy as an “epidemic” and examine the complex interactions between experts, publics, biomedical categories, and institutions in the shaping of a population health problem.

In what follows, I focus both on the moment of emergence of the peanut allergy phenomenon and on the subsequent or co-occurring social reactions. I show when the peanut allergy phenomenon emerged in the medical literature and how public, expert, and institutional reactions to the emergent epidemic expanded the sphere of social awareness and surveillance of peanut allergy risk. I will argue that the category of the peanut allergy “epidemic” was co-constructed and deployed through interactions among various social worlds. Highlighting the social mobility around this contested epidemic, including the calibration of public discourse and the reorganization of social space, I consider the discursive and material effects of the new phenomenon.

### Data and methods

Focusing here principally on the period 1980–2010, I report on a multi-site analysis of print materials, in which I follow the object of the peanut allergy in salient social worlds (see Clarke, 2005). A key component to this analysis is to examine the emergence and meaning of responses to peanut allergies as a medical and public problem, as revealed by medicine, media, advocates, parents, and institutions (Nettleton et al., 2009). I began with a targeted literature search in the PubMed database for medical and clinical journal articles with keywords of peanut\* and anaphyl\*, or peanut\* and allerg\*, or peanut\* and hypersens\* for all years through 2010 ( $n = 1345$ ). I read article titles and abstracts of these results and then conducted a LexisNexis Academic search for English-language news with peanut\* and allerg\* in the headline between 1980 and 2010. I read headlines and lead paragraphs of newspaper reports ( $n = 779$ ) and news broadcast transcripts ( $n = 64$ ). For recent social discourse on peanut allergies, I analyzed the website of a major trade association of the peanut industry, the American Peanut Council, as well as the online materials of arguably the highest profile food allergy organization in the U.S., the Food Allergy &

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