

**Volume 7**

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**The End of Smallpox?**

**Lead: The last known case of naturally occurring smallpox in the world was reported in Somalia in 1977. Edward Jenner would have been pleased.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: Smallpox, or variola, has been one of the most feared diseases in history. This viral infection with its weeping, scarring pustules, by the 1700s was claiming one out of three urban children during epidemics. It was transmitted through the air so it was not necessarily a disease of**

**poverty or poor sanitation and its victims included the great as well as the humble. From the poorest farm child to Peter the Great of Russia, from the town crier to Queen Elizabeth I.**

**Those who survived the disease were scarred where the sores had healed and their survival indicated that re-infection was quite rare. This led to the first attempts at prevention. In the early 1700s Europeans with contacts in the Middle East learned that deliberate infection through the skin, usually less severe, could reduce the possibility of natural respiratory infection. This came to be called inoculation. Instead of one out of five victims, inoculated smallpox killed**

**only one out of 200. Still a safer means of prevention was needed. Enter Edward Jenner. Jenner was a well-trained and respected surgeon with a practice in rural Cheltenham England. He first proved the idea that smallpox could be prevented by inoculation with safe animal agents such as cowpox. In 1796 he injected James Phipps with cowpox virus. Six weeks later Phipps successfully resisted smallpox infection. To avoid confusion this process was called vaccination, from the Latin word *vacca* meaning cow.**

**Many people opposed vaccination in the early years. Those who made money from regular inoculations fought it. Others felt that smallpox**

**helped contain population growth and cleansed the system. Some felt that men should not be contaminated by animal blood, but gradually resistance faded and the disease moved from epidemic to individual infections and then disappeared. Whether this is a complete eradication or a temporary respite while the virus mutates remains to be seen, but for the time being smallpox as memory is a welcome phenomenon.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

**Resources**

**Baxby, Derrick. "The End of Smallpox," *History Today* 49 (3, March 1999): 14-20.**

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