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Villains and Heroes: The Story of Smallpox

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Lecture by Professor Gareth Williams
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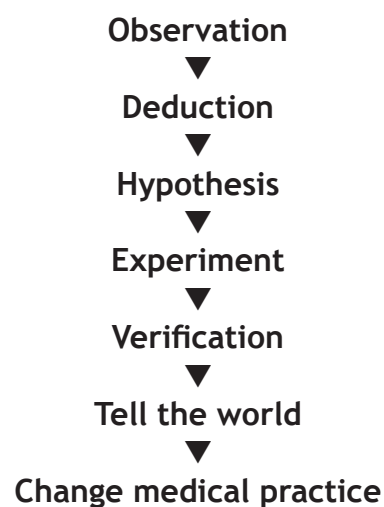


Professor Gareth Williams

At the joint meeting of the Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society and the Bristol Medico-Historical Society, Professor Gareth Williams presented an excellent historical review of smallpox.

He described how Edward Jenner, the main hero of the piece, defeated the main villain, smallpox, by acting on information given to him by a milkmaid. When offering to variolate her (innoculate with live smallpox) she had replied "I cannot take smallpox for I have had cowpox".

This sentence stayed with him for the rest of his life and eventually, after much urging by the surgical polymath John Hunter, Jenner enacted what should be the modern research method.



Eventually Jenner's method of inoculation, known as vaccination, led to the elimination of smallpox from the world.

Vaccination was not without its detractors and there were many people bitterly opposed to the technique. They were prepared to lie and obfuscate if this succeeded in preventing vaccination. But the supporters of vaccination were many, including King Carlos of Spain who sent vaccinators all round the globe between 1803 and 1806.

On occasions the vaccinators themselves were sparing or even ignorant of the truth. For example they claimed that immunity to smallpox was lifelong after vaccination when in fact it usually lasts for about ten years.

People who oppose inoculation continue to halt progress in eradicating disease. Thus, for example, measles has returned in force due to worries about the MMR "vaccine".

On the 8th of May 1980, despite the predictions of many that the day would never come, the WHO declared that target zero for smallpox had been achieved.

The next disease to be defeated by eradication will probably be Guinea Worm ... and if the political will is there and the teams involved are successful, this may be followed by Polio.

The talk was fascinating and the knowledge of history such as this enables us to understand the present more clearly and may permit the clear-sighted to predict something of the future.

Professor Williams's book on the subject was short-listed for the prestigious Wellcome Trust Book Prize. I can assure you that it is a thoroughly good read.

Reference

1) 'Angel of Death: The Story of Smallpox' by Professor Gareth Williams Palgrave Macmillan, 448pp, £18.99. ISBN 9780230274716.