

D. A. Henderson: Smallpox. The Death of a Disease. The Inside Story of Eradicating a Worldwide Killer

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The global eradication of smallpox represents one of mankind's greatest public health achievements. Dr. D. A. Henderson, the person who led this worldwide effort, under the aegis of the World Health Organization, has written a gripping account of how smallpox was finally conquered. His is a very personal narrative, richly woven with lively and spellbinding details. It is also a tale that provides fascinating insights into the array of formidable bureaucratic, cultural, logistical, and political barriers that Henderson had to overcome in order to literally bring about the death of this disease.

That the planetary eradication of smallpox was eventually achieved is in large measure due to Henderson the man, the dedicated physician, the skilled managerial leader, and the committed public health advocate schooled in the philosophy of epidemiology.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many take for granted the decline of communicable diseases. The case of smallpox is vastly different because it is the only disease ever to be eradicated. It was a disease that caused hundreds of millions of deaths and which had plagued mankind with intense fear and suffering for millennia. Its eradication would not have been possible without the leadership of a remarkable man who knew how to mobilize equally dedicated people to join his creative crusade, then considered doomed to failure by many.

Forged in the then nascent Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Communicable Disease Center under the leadership of Dr. Alexander Langmuir, Henderson quickly came to value the importance of field epidemiology. Langmuir set very high performance standards for his epidemiologists

and strongly advocated shoe-leather epidemiology as essential to investigating and controlling epidemics. To drive home this point, the certificates of completion for Langmuir's annual Epidemic Intelligence Service course were decorated with the soles of a pair of shoes. Henderson embraced Langmuir's philosophy of the central role of field investigations in disease control, and made it a cornerstone of the global effort to eradicate smallpox.

A detailed technical volume of 1,460 pages on the eradication of smallpox was published in 1988 by the World Health Organization. Titled, *Smallpox and Its Eradication*, and co-authored by five authors including Henderson, this book provides much detailed information about the vaccination campaigns in various regions of the world as well as accounts of outbreaks and epidemics and efforts to contain them. *Smallpox. The Death of a Disease*, on the other hand, is a much more personal account told from the vantage point of the director of the World Health Organization's effort to eradicate the disease.

This volume is divided into eleven chapters: The Disease, The Virus and Its History; The World Decides to Eradicate Smallpox; Creating a Global Program, Where to Begin?; A Tale of Two Countries—Brazil and Indonesia; Africa—A Formidable and Complicated Challenge; India and Nepal—A Natural Home of Endemic Smallpox; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—The Last Stronghold of *Variola Major*; Ethiopia and Somalia—The Last Countries with Smallpox; Smallpox—Post-Eradication; Smallpox as a Biological Weapon; Lessons and Legacies of Smallpox Eradication.

As the titles of these chapters indicate, the scope of Henderson's coverage is comprehensive and up to date, as reflected in his riveting chapter on recent concerns about the smallpox virus being used as a biological weapon, and national responses to that possible threat.

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Henderson's post-smallpox eradication career has been remarkable. He served as Dean of the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health for many years, was Life Sciences Advisor to President George H. W. Bush, first Director of the Office of Public Health Emergency Preparedness in the Department of Health and Human Services, and is currently Professor of Medicine and Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh, and Distinguished Scholar at the university's Center for Biosecurity in

Baltimore. The recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, he has been referred to as "one of America's heroes" by Tommy A. Thompson, former US Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Smallpox. The Death of a Disease is a unique and inspiring book that portrays the struggles of a remarkable man to defeat one of humanity's worst diseases. It is must reading for all who are in any way involved in preventive medicine, public health, community health and allied fields.