

SMALLPOX – The Elimination of a Virus

Friday, 8th May 2020, marks the 40th anniversary of the eradication of smallpox.

On 8th May 1980, the 33rd World Health Assembly issued its official declaration that “*the world and all its peoples have won freedom from smallpox*”. This was the formal recognition that a scourge that had afflicted millions for thousands of years was at an end. Until it was wiped out, smallpox had plagued humanity for at least 3000 years, killing 300 million people in the 20th century alone, that is 4 million people annually.

Smallpox is the first and only disease to be permanently eradicated worldwide. After much work around the world and over many years, a 10-year Intensified Smallpox Eradication Programme was launched by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1967 to concentrate on endemic countries. The last known endemic case was reported and the outbreak promptly contained in Somalia in 1977. This was achieved through global solidarity when, even at the height of the Cold War, the USA and the then USSR joined forces to conquer the common health threat. Viruses do not respect nations or ideologies and the eradication of this killer shows that anything is possible if there is a will to achieve it.

The successful programme yielded vital knowledge and tools for the field of disease surveillance, the benefits of ring vaccination and the importance of health promotion in fighting diseases such as poliomyelitis and the Ebola virus. It also laid the foundation for stronger national immunization programmes worldwide, underpinning the establishment of primary health care in many countries and creating momentum toward Universal Health Coverage.

The eradication of Smallpox is probably the greatest accomplishment of any multilateral organization, ever and there are many lessons to learn from it that can help fight the COVID-19 pandemic today and prepare for future pandemics. Those lessons must be learned and put to good use.

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