



International Partnerships

Smallpox eradication – a cold war victory

Donald Henderson

The author, who was in charge of the smallpox eradication campaign, recalls how remarkable individuals decided to work together for a common purpose, and in doing so achieved infinitely more than the official hostilities of superpowers.

A critical but little-appreciated factor in the achievement of smallpox eradication was a remarkable collaboration between WHO, the USA and the USSR beginning in 1966 and extending through the certification of eradication in 1980. Although many years during this period were especially tense ones in East-West relationships, professionals from the two countries worked amicably together within a WHO framework to galvanize the smallpox eradication campaign and to bring it to a successful conclusion little more than 10 years after its inception. There are many chapters to the story, but perhaps the following highlights are the ones most worth recounting.

WHO's commitment to smallpox eradication was made at the instigation of the Soviet Union, an act for which the Russian government has rightfully claimed the

credit. In 1958, Academician Viktor Zhdanov, then Deputy Minister of Health of the Soviet Union, proposed to the World Health Assembly that smallpox eradication should be undertaken as a priority programme of the Organization. As he pointed out, the Soviet Union as well as other smallpox-free countries was regularly besieged by smallpox importations from abroad, which compelled all countries to continue costly national vaccination programmes to protect themselves. Why not join forces to attack the problem on a global scale? He noted that the Soviet Union had interrupted transmission in 1936 with a liquid vaccine which was not heat-stable and at a time when the health infrastructure, transport and communications in some parts of the country were still comparatively primitive. This showed clearly that smallpox transmission could be stopped even under difficult conditions. Given that large quantities of highly stable freeze-dried vaccine could now be produced, was it not reasonable to pursue a global programme? Once smallpox was eradicated, vaccination could cease everywhere.

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