Health Leaders

Edward Jenner, slayer of the “speckled monster”

John Empson

Monuments to Edward Jenner exist in several countries. He is known as “the country doctor who benefited mankind”.

In the late eighteenth century a doctor, Edward Jenner, practising in the English county of Gloucestershire, observed that milkmaids were immune to a deadly disease then commonly known as the “speckled monster”. He demonstrated in 1796 that people could be protected against the “speckled monster”, otherwise called smallpox, by inoculating them with lymph from pustules produced in cases of cowpox, a milder disease. Smallpox was finally banished from the face of the earth just over 200 years later, following an international eradication programme (1).

In Britain, after some initial problems associated with the use of contaminated material, the development of vaccination was consolidated with the founding of the Royal Jennerian Society, which, in 1808, became the National Vaccine Institute. In 1840 the inoculation of smallpox as a means of providing protection against the disease was banned. Compulsory vaccination was introduced in 1853, and, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, smallpox was no longer endemic in the country.

Of the various forms of recognition and commemoration accorded to Jenner for his momentous pioneering work, the most impressive are perhaps the statues that have been erected in his honour. The first, created by Robert William Sievier, was installed by his friends and neighbours in Gloucester Cathedral in 1825, two years after Jenner’s death.

William Woodville, a doctor of the London Smallpox Hospital, visited France and performed vaccinations at Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1800. In 1805 Napoleon decreed that his soldiers should be vaccinated. In 1865 a memorial to Jenner was erected at Boulogne as a tribute from France.

Genoa’s Galleria d’Arte Moderna contains a sculpture of Jenner vaccinating his son. It is one of the most famous statues of Jenner, and a cast of it stands in the Wellcome building in London. In 1873 Giulio Monteverde was commissioned to create it by the Duchess of Galliera, in recognition of the protection that vaccination had afforded her family. Italy was, indeed, at the forefront of the vaccination movement. Luigi Sacco already having vaccinated some 8000 people by 1801.

The benefits of vaccination reached Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, when cowpox
The statue of Edward Jenner in Kensington Gardens, London

Photograph taken by Dan Atkin
scabs, the source of the vaccine, were introduced into the country. In 1904 a memorial to Jenner was erected in the grounds of the Japanese National Museum in Tokyo.

Jenner’s principal statue, the work of William Calder Marshall, was inaugurated on a prestigious site in London’s Trafalgar Square by Queen Victoria’s consort, Prince Albert, in 1858. Among the donations supporting this tribute were substantial contributions from Russia and the United States. However, the memorial was considered inappropriate for a square devoted to Britain’s military heroes, and in 1862 it was therefore moved to Kensington Gardens, attached to Kensington Palace, where it remains today. Smallpox having killed the wife, mother and father of King William III, who founded the palace, it is fitting that a corner of Kensington Gardens should be dedicated to the memory of the man without whose work the world would not have been rid of the disease.

In 1996 the statue of Edward Jenner in Kensington Gardens was a focal point for celebrations marking the bicentenary of his great discovery. As the plaque beneath the statue has it, he was “the country doctor who benefitted mankind”, and thanks to him the “speckled monster” has been slain.

Reference


The toll of malaria south of the Sahara

In Africa, malaria is responsible for about 10% of hospital admissions and 20–30% of outpatient consultations. Children are particularly at risk of disease, malaria being one of the major childhood killers in rural tropical Africa, taking the life of one out of 20 children before the age of five years. The disease causes anaemia in children and pregnant women and increases vulnerability to other diseases. Malaria is also a major cause of school absenteeism. In young adults in Africa, malaria is still one of the most common diseases, and it tends to strike at the time of year when agricultural work is at its height.