
TEN YEARS OF FREEDOM FROM AN ANCIENT SCOURGE

Smallpox: never again!

by Dr Halfdan Mahler

Director-General of the World Health Organization

Ten years have now elapsed since the world's last case of endemic smallpox was detected, in Somalia. Ten years are surely enough to convince even the most hardened sceptics—and there were many—who said that smallpox was too insidious a disease to be *really* eradicated from the planet. Surely it would turn up again to plague mankind as it has done since time immemorial?

Nevertheless smallpox *has* gone from the world. Throughout the past decade, the alarm bells have rung many times. Smallpox has been “definitely diagnosed” in this country or that. But WHO's meticulously kept “international rumour register” proves the value of unrelenting surveillance: every alarm has turned out on investigation to be a false one—the result of chickenpox or measles or skin disease or erroneous press reporting.

The eradication of smallpox is a truly sensational example of what can be done when all the nations of the world

pull together in a venture that will benefit not only our generation but that of our children and our children's children. When the history of the twentieth century comes to be written from the standpoint of the twenty-first, this achievement will undoubtedly rank alongside such wonders as the mastery of flight and the landing of men upon the moon.

We at WHO are proud of the part we played in this achievement—but we are not resting on our laurels either. The next step is to harness the same international will and energy to bring about the whole package of educational, environmental, social, behavioural, medical, organizational and managerial actions that we call Health for all by the year 2000. And in so doing, we shall make good use of the lessons we learnt in those stirring years when the pock-marked map of the globe was gradually cleansed until the last vestige of smallpox was wiped away for ever.

