Dr Jenner's legacy

It was in 1796 that an English country doctor, Edward Jenner, discovered the principle of vaccination. By 1801 more than 100,000 persons had protected themselves with his vaccine, and he predicted that "the annihilation of the smallpox—the most dreadful scourge of the human species—must be the final result of this practice." In the end it took 183 years and a huge international effort, under the aegis of WHO. But Dr Jenner was proved right.

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Jenner (right) even left his mark on the moon, where a crater bears his name.

Above: Search teams used every kind of vehicle, and offered cash rewards, to track down the last case in Bangladesh, three-year-old Rahima Banu, and—in Somalia in 1977—the world's last endemic case, Ali Maow Maalin. Below: Every rumour was checked on, but proved to be chickenpox or other diseases. Right: The Certificate of Global Eradication.
The USSR proposed to the 11th World Health Assembly that smallpox should be eradicated and this was approved in 1959. The programme was greatly intensified in 1967, and in four years had wiped out smallpox in Latin America. Four more years toppled the disease's last bastion in Asia. The multi-national teams closed in on Somalia, scene of "the last stand". In December 1979, an independent commission confirmed the eradication of smallpox from the planet.

What next?

Lifting the heavy yoke of smallpox from a long-suffering world was probably the greatest health achievement of this century. Besides encouraging many advances in producing and safeguarding vaccines, it showed the impact that community-based action can have on preventive health, particularly when backed by political will at the highest level. The next step is to harness the same international will and energy to bring about the whole package of educational, environmental, behavioural, medical and managerial actions that WHO calls Health for all by the year 2000.