BOOK REVIEW: SMALLPOX — THE DEATH OF A DISEASE: THE INSIDE STORY OF ERADICATING A WORLDWIDE KILLER

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The defeat of smallpox was a public health tour de force that remains the sole example of humans wiping out a disease. The knockout blow arrived through a World Health Organization eradication campaign lasting from 1967 to 1977. In this thorough and compelling book, Henderson describes how that effort unfolded, going country-by-country to highlight challenges and successes. He ought to know: He directed the program.

After a brief history of smallpox, Henderson draws from his insider perspective to detail the WHO strategy. Plenty of vaccine was available from the outset, he writes, but attempting to reach every at-risk person invited futility. Rather, Henderson and his team used an approach built on surveillance, containment and targeted vaccination. The book details, through anecdotes, how delivering vaccine to infected villages stopped the spread of outbreaks.

Africa posed a particular challenge with dozens of countries, hundreds of local languages and few paved roads. WHO teams there were prepped in foreign languages and even in auto repair for the inevitable breakdowns. These experiences come to life through striking photographs that put a human face on this monumental effort.

Thanks to the WHO effort, whole generations now refer to smallpox only in the past tense — with one caveat: In the book’s final section, Henderson describes the use of live smallpox in bioweapons research in the Soviet Union even after the disease was eradicated. The virus still exists in Russian and American labs. With the passion of one who has spent his life fighting the disease, Henderson advocates destroying these stocks.