

# **MEDIA RELEASE**

**NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA**

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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## **Smallpox immunisation history key to future public health**

The world's first vaccination campaign – held 200 years ago to eradicate smallpox - is the focus of research at the University of Tasmania, with potential implications for contemporary public health policies.

The three-year study (DP0878387) has received more than \$300,000 from the Australian Research Council.

The aim of the project is to understand, for the first time, the vaccination revolution as a global event and the factors to explain the rapid support and establishment of a program to inoculate children with the animal disease, cowpox, as a preventative of smallpox.

History and Classics Chief Investigator Professor Michael Bennett said the research was significant as it provided a historical perspective to current global health concerns like bird flu and resurgent killers such as malaria.

Prof. Bennett said the historical study also had national relevance by reviewing the smallpox outbreak which decimated the Aboriginal population around Sydney in 1789.

The first vaccination campaign was launched in 1798 at a time when a major proportion of the world's children were killed or scarred for life by smallpox.

“In the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, vaccination was introduced to the world, the first large-scale public health initiatives were set in train, over two million people were vaccinated and death and suffering alleviated on a massive scale,” Prof. Bennett said.

“The project is significant in bringing to centre stage a key event in world history that has largely been neglected in the literature.

“It could not be more urgent or timely as new and old viruses threaten the world and rapid and mass immunisation may be its only defence.”

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