

# **MEDIA RELEASE**

**NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA**

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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## **The pointy end of public health**

We all benefit from vaccination, but where did it all begin?

The first full-scale study of the rise of global vaccination is well under way at UTAS.

Professor Michael Bennett, from the UTAS School of History and Classics, is leading an Australian Research Council project which examines the success and failure of the first major public health campaign in world history.

Prof Bennett said in the 18th Century smallpox was universally feared. It was responsible for killing or scarring a significant proportion of the world's children.

"In 1798, English surgeon Edward Jenner presented evidence that exposure to the relatively benign disease of cowpox provided immunity and he proposed cowpox inoculation," Prof Bennett said.

The terms "vaccine" and "vaccination" — derived from the Latin for "cow" (*vacca*) - began to be used generically.

"It was not easy to persuade people that they should infect their children with an animal disease, but Jenner and his followers were able to demonstrate experimentally that cowpox gave immunity by exposing vaccinated children to smallpox."

By 1800 cowpox vaccination was established in several centres in continental Europe and the USA and ambitious vaccination programs were soon underway in Napoleonic France, Sweden, Russia, India and Latin America.

The first vaccinations in Hobart took place in 1805.

Prof Bennett said the advent of vaccination was a major event in world history.

"Within a decade several million people were vaccinated and for the first time people saw the total eradication of a major disease as an achievable goal," he said.

Prof Bennett said the project addresses major gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the early history of vaccination, including the use of children in trials of the practice and in securing the supply of vaccine and the beginnings of the system of compulsory vaccination.

“We are examining the rapidity of the spread of the new preventative, the scale of the mobilisation inside and outside the medical profession, the ambition of the immunisation programs and the global dimension of the movement.”

Prof Bennett said the study is also giving give a historical dimension to contemporary concerns about pandemic disease, vaccination and bio-terrorism and generating new insights into the factors determining the success and failure of public health initiatives.

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