The world has not seen a case of endemic smallpox since 1977 and has not seen any cases whatsoever since 1979. This is a staggering accomplishment. Smallpox went from being one of the world’s most dreaded diseases to existing only in vials in two secure storage facilities at labs in the United States and Russia in just a few decades. The international community overcame intense skepticism, technical and logistical hurdles, and resistance within various communities to eradicate one of the most lethal infectious diseases ever known.

Making smallpox eradication a reality took more than mass vaccination. It required surveillance. Indeed, the smallpox eradication program did not show definitive success until it embraced surveillance as its central strategy. Only by identifying every single case of the disease in any given community and then tracking down every person who had come into contact with that case, the eradicators argued, could the international community be certain that the disease had truly disappeared from circulation.

This emphasis on surveillance and its attendant vaccination policies certainly provoked resistance in certain communities. Some local officials displayed great reluctance to report cases out of fear for the consequences, and some communities actively resisted this surveillance out of dislike for foreign oversight and respect for particular deities. Such resistance required eradicators to adjust their techniques on the fly and find ways to make their program resonate with local beliefs. They had to convince local populations that the surveillance and vaccination efforts were in their best interest and would not offend political leaders or supernatural beings. Although they may not initially like the surveillance, local communities needed to understand its importance for saving their lives and protecting their children.
In effect, the smallpox eradication campaign conclusively demonstrated the vital role that biopolitical surveillance can play in protecting the health of humanity. Surveillance was not an option chosen by governments for malicious ends; it was a central element in eliminating a killer disease. Groups certainly resisted it, and they resented its imposition and the strong-armed tactics used in some instances, but the need for active and thorough surveillance ultimately trumped concerns about its maliciousness. The eradication of smallpox only came about because of biopolitical surveillance. This was truly a pure public good, as all of humanity benefits from the terrible disease’s disappearance.

At the same time, the smallpox eradication campaign also clearly demonstrated why some people and groups resist biopolitical surveillance. Vaccinators imposed a strategy with little transparency or accountability to local communities. There existed few, if any, venues for providing information about the nature of the campaign and its importance. The vaccinated persons felt like their rights were being violated and their beliefs disrespected. These fears fed rumors about malicious intents behind the eradication campaign.

To tell the story of smallpox’s eradication, we need to first understand the disease’s etiology and history. This chapter will trace the development of, resistance to, and ultimate success of the smallpox eradication program. The eradication effort succeeded both because of some unique characteristics of the virus and the special emphasis placed on creating a useful and accurate surveillance program. We will also see why some groups and communities actively resisted this surveillance. Finally, the chapter will briefly discuss the resurgence of interest in vaccinating populations against smallpox and the biopolitical fears such programs provoke.

**Signs and Symptoms of Smallpox**

They called it “the speckled monster.” It seemingly struck at random, killing young and old, rich and poor, male and female. It killed more than one-quarter of those infected. Survivors bore disfiguring scars for the rest of their lives. Smallpox-inspired levels of dread and mortality unique among infectious diseases thanks to its randomness and its virulence. A medical textbook published in 1888 described the disease thus: “Smallpox, by reason of the malignant nature of its poison, and the general susceptibility to it of individuals of all ages, races, classes, and conditions, is the most loathsome and fatal disease known to man.”

---

1. Medical textbook from 1888.