

# Most people believe smallpox not an extinct disease

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The vast majority of Scottish people interviewed in the streets of Edinburgh are unaware of one of the greatest achievements of medical science – the eradication of smallpox from the world over 40 years ago. A poll sponsored by the Society for General Microbiology (SGM), in conjunction with the Edinburgh International Science Festival, has revealed that 87% of 200 individuals questioned did not know that the horrendous, killer disease is now extinct.

But there's good news too. The study, conducted by Scotinform, showed that many people are conscious of the wide range of activities of microorganisms. Three quarters of interviewees knew that microbes are used to make medicines, while 65% knew that bacteria can live inside active volcanoes and 54% knew that they can attack North Sea oil platforms. About 44% were even aware of the role of microbes in chocolate making (where they promote the fermentation of the cacao beans).

“Overall, these results are reassuring,” says Dr Bernard Dixon, who will present a report of the research during a session of the SGM's Spring Meeting at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre on Monday 31 March. “However, there are a few worries. For example, while 80% of people knew that microbes were invisible forms of life such as bacteria and viruses, this did not apply at the lowest age range. Nearly 40% of 16-24 year olds did not know what microbes are.

“Particularly disquieting overall was the level of ignorance of smallpox

eradication. This disease killed 300-500 million victims during the 20th century. As recently as 1967, 15 million people contracted the appalling, disfiguring infection and 2 million of them died. However, thanks to a World Health Organization campaign, based on vaccination, smallpox was declared extinct in 1979.”

“Scientists are often reluctant to trumpet achievements of this sort, so they themselves may be partly to blame for the level of ignorance revealed by the survey in Edinburgh (which would almost certainly have produced the same result in London or elsewhere in Britain),” says Dr Dixon. “But smallpox elimination is not just a piece of history. When people today reject immunisation against other killer diseases such as measles, they are often unaware of the huge impact vaccines have made in protecting us not only against smallpox but also against diphtheria, poliomyelitis and other fearful conditions.”

Source: Society for General Microbiology

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