



History of the first recorded smallpox vaccination

Edward Jenner is renowned as the "father of smallpox vaccination". Perhaps rightly so, for he dedicated his life, money and reputation to spreading the use of vaccination. In 1774, some twenty years before Jenner first used vaccination on a boy called James Phipps in 1796, at Berkeley in Gloucestershire, a farmer's wife, together with her two sons was vaccinated by her husband at Yetminster in Dorset.

In 1774 farmer, Benjamin Jesty was living in Yetminster with his pregnant wife Elizabeth, two sons, Robert and Benjamin aged three and two, and a baby also called Elizabeth. During the spring and summer of that year the highly infectious disease of smallpox raged in the area. Benjamin feared for the health of his wife and family. Having had smallpox himself as a child, he was immune to the disease.

In common with many country folk, Benjamin was fully aware of the age-old tradition that people who had earlier caught the mild disease of cowpox did not catch the normally fatal disease of smallpox. At this time, the Jesty's had two dairymaids, Ann Notley and Mary Reade. Both of these girls had previously had cowpox, and both had nursed family members with smallpox during the current epidemic. It was probably the fact that neither of these girls had caught the disease that decided Benjamin on his subsequent course of action.

Benjamin reasoned that if dairymaids who caught cowpox accidentally were immune to smallpox, then someone who caught cowpox deliberately should be equally immune. He therefore resolved to infect his family with cowpox with a procedure that was later to become known as vaccination. The word vaccination derives directly from this connection with cowpox. Vacca is the Latin for cow.

As luck would have it, an outbreak of cowpox occurred on the farm of Mr. Elford at nearby Chetnole. Benjamin immediately took his wife and sons there, the baby Elizabeth was considered too young. In the open field, Benjamin took infected pus from the udder of a cow. With the point of a stocking needle he scratched his wife's arm just below the elbow and inserted the pus. The first authenticated vaccination had taken place. He then repeated the process on his two sons.

Over the next few days the mild disease of cowpox ran its normal course in the two boys who were soon recovered and running about as normal. Elizabeth however was not so lucky and became extremely ill. She ran a high fever and her arm became very inflamed. Fearing for the safety of his wife and unborn child he called in the local doctor to treat the fever. Fortunately the fever subsided and Elizabeth recovered fully and lived for another fifty years, but the secret was out.

Word got around of what Benjamin had done and Elizabeth and the boys became the object of their neighbours derision, who fully expected them to turn into cows, or at the very least to grow horns. Benjamin, as contemporary accounts relate, was "*hooted at, reviled and pelted whenever he attended markets in the neighbourhood. He remained undaunted and never failed from this cause to attend to his duties*". It is not known how long this scorn lasted.

In 1797 the Jesty family moved to Worth Matravers in the Isle of Purbeck. It is here that we find clearly documented evidence that Benjamin also performed vaccinations on other people. In the parish church there is a tablet in memory of one Mary Brown which states that her mother, Abigail Brown, was vaccinated by Benjamin Jesty. The same inscription can be found on the gravestone in the churchyard. It is not known how many others were vaccinated as people who were vaccinated probably kept quiet about it in view of the derision the Jests had received.

Despite a review by a medical commission, Benjamin Jesty never received credit for his pioneering work, all the credit, and financial rewards going to Jenner, a doctor, with many friends in the medical establishment in London who spent considerable time and money developing and refining the technique. Jenner himself never accepted that he had been pre-empted by Jesty.

The Jests however freely admitted that they were probably not the first with vaccination, as indicated by the inscription on their gravestone behind the Parish Church in Worth Matravers. It clearly states that Jesty was "*the first person (known) that introduced the Cow Pox by inoculation*". Thus respecting the fact the this widely known immunity to smallpox may have inspired other anonymous people to the same deed.

Nevertheless Elizabeth Jesty of Dorset can certainly claim to be the first recorded person to have been vaccinated.