THE JECH GALLERY.....

Francisco Xavier Balmis (1753–1819), a pioneer of international vaccination

Photograph of a bronze bust of Balmis donated by the Rotary Club of Mexico City to the Faculty of Medicine in Alicante. Photo by Eduardo Lastres.

Born in Alicante, Spain, a physician and army surgeon Francisco Xavier Balmis, was the author of the first translation into Spanish of Moreau de La Sarthe's book on vaccine. In his edition, Balmis added a foreword to make the book more complete and understandable to the Spanish readers of both hemispheres.

Recognition of his work in this translation and his previous travels in America to collect plants and medical data, made him the best candidate to conduct his own project of spreading the vaccine in all Spanish territories from Spain and through America to the Philippines.

By order of King Carlos IV, an expedition sailed from La Coruña with the aim of sailing round the world and spread Jenner's vaccine overseas.

On board the corvette "María Pita" were Balmis as commander of what was already called "Real Expedición Filantrópica de la Vacuna", Antonio Salvany as second in command, three surgeons, two first aid practitioners, four male nurses, and 22 orphan children.

Besides the usual medical items the expedition carried two thousand copies of Balmis' translation of Moreau de La Sarthe's book, which were to be handed to the medical and political authorities everywhere they were to stop along their journey.

The vaccine was maintained during the journey by sequentially vaccinating arm to arm every 9 or 10 days the 22 children who thus constituted a living transmission chain.

The expedition and the men who took part in it were an example of the spirit of that century of enlightenment, philanthropy, and a faith in science and ability of men to know and change the world.

It took almost four years to complete the voyage round the world, and that task can now be considered the first global campaign in what we now call public health, and a success in spreading world wide Jenner's vaccine that cannot be praised enough.

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APHORISM OF THE MONTH.....

Elephant story 2

This is an account of an international agency working in a rural area of Asia where infant mortality rates are very high—often associated with infantile diarrhoea. The development team decide that what is needed is to improve sanitation in the village and install a block latrine. Some years later they revisit the area and find that the latrine is unused and broken down. And that the health situation remains much the same. Somebody suggests that they should find out from the villagers what has gone on and what they think about it all. What they discover is that it is not as though the villagers are uncaring about the fate of their children but that sanitation is not at the top of their list of priorities. Their major preoccupation is that every year when the sugar cane is nearly ready the elephants appear and trample it all down so they cannot harvest it and obtain economic benefit from it. As a result of the discussions a new project is undertaken to protect the sugar from the elephants. When this has proved to be successful the credibility of the international group is enhanced, the villages are ready to talk about other concerns including infant welfare and sanitation.

I discovered this truth for myself in the Liverpool inner city area of Vauxhall in the early 1980s, an old Irish working class area of the city. The Eldon Street Community Association had come to organise themselves when the city council had threatened to demolish their houses as part of slum clearance. The Eldonians' motto was "Professionals should be on tap not on top" and they had very clear priorities for their community. Decent housing, jobs, decent schooling for their children, and a safe community. With by far and away the worst health statistics in the city, poorly served by medical services, sky high smoking rates, and an appalling diet, these things took second place for their own clear understanding of what needed to be achieved first. Twenty years later with their priorities largely met this community is heavily engaged in more conventional health promotion and health improvement initiatives.

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