

A Sickness No One Could Escape: Examining Disease in the Pacific Northwest

Researchers: Dr. Keith Carlson (UFV), Dr. John Lutz (UVic), in collaboration with research assistants: Michaela Sapielak, Holly Janzen, Maaria Zafar, Aliyah Friesen, Jackie Drummond.

Report by Jackie Drummond and Aliyah Friesen

This summer UFV's Peace and Reconciliation Centre launched a research project that looked at the spread and impact of disease amongst Indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest. The purpose of this research is to investigate where these epidemics came from, how they were spread, vaccination efforts, to what extent they affected Indigenous people then, and how past epidemics still create challenges for Indigenous people today.

The study began with research students compiling a list of useful literature that would provide insight into these historical epidemics. These ethnographies were later read through, and useful information was inputted into a database for future use. Reading through this information took most of the summer. As the project continues, students will go through primary sources and begin inquiring with local museums and archives for artifacts and documents related to the research.

So far, students have noticed that the two major epidemics in the Pacific Northwest took place in the 1780s and 1860s. Possible theories on how these epidemics started include: European ships docking along the British Columbian and Alaskan coasts; an influx of gold miners; missionary efforts; and trading forts throughout the area.

Aliyah Friesen has been heading the research around how the vaccine was administered, including looking at the differences between smallpox and cowpox inoculations. In the early years of developing a vaccine, variolous matter would be taken from the pustule of another person suffering from smallpox, and inserted into a small, shallow cut on the arm of the individual being inoculated. By 1836, physicians became concerned that the vaccine was not as effective after travelling through many bodies, resulting in the idea of revaccination.

Through her research, Friesen also looked into the distribution of the vaccine matter, finding many different methods that physicians tried to best determine how to maintain the integrity of the vaccine as it traveled. With trial and error, doctors came to determine the most effective ways to store, transport, and administer the vaccine. As vaccination methods became more commonly known among physicians, starting around the 1840s, they began experimenting more on cows in order to perfect the vaccine. And by 1865, physicians had moved on to discovering ways to prevent permanent scarring on the face, as well as how to avoid infection and syphilis.

The Indigenous populations attempted to combat smallpox through natural medicine, shamanism, sweat-bathing, and cold-water plunges, but these methods were not able to protect Indigenous people from smallpox. European missionaries and doctors provided vaccination to some of the Indigenous people, although Indigenous people were often distrustful of the vaccine and those administering it. Despite efforts to control the spread of the disease, smallpox took an incredible toll on Indigenous populations.