

# The smallpox outbreak

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## SCARE OF 1881 — A PANIC-STRICKEN CITY

Although serious enough in the human suffering, disfigurement, and death that it spread among the community, the smallpox epidemic in 1881 will always be remembered for the great panic into which it plunged Sydney. The outbreak on that occasion was the worst by which the city has ever been overtaken. Before the loathsome disease was effectively stamped out 40 persons had died out of the 154 which were stricken with the scourge.

The first case was reported on May 25, 1881, and the last on February 19, 1882, the epidemic thus extending over a period of 271 days. The visitation had its origin in Lower George Street, at the house of a Chinese merchant, one of whose children was the first victim. No further case was notified for 21 days. The disease then appeared simultaneously in Surry Hills, Cumberland Street, Waterloo, and Circular Quay. A second period of 20 days then elapsed before the disease again showed itself, when, between July 5 and 15, it broke out in seven houses in as many localities. From the middle of July to the end of February, 1882, about 200 days, 121 cases occurred in different parts of Sydney and suburbs.

## A DIRTY CITY

At the time of the outbreak various circumstances had combined to render Sydney peculiarly susceptible to the influences of smallpox. The population had been both rapidly and largely increased, many months had passed without the occurrence of rain sufficiently copious to cleanse the ground surface and flush the sewers, the structural and sanitary condition of the city was in a state of active employment which rendered it impatient of impediment or trouble.

If the scare of '81 did nothing else, it revealed the shameless disregard for cleanliness and decency that had been permitted in Sydney, and showed how large a field there was for an inspector of nuisances. The conditions under which many of the Chinese residents were living were inexpressibly shocking but, as the disclosures made at the time proved, systematic violation of sanitary laws was not confined to the Chinese.

The alarm occasioned by the ravages of the pestilence, however, resulted in the removal of many evils. It also brought about a general recognition of the advantages to be gained from vaccination, though now, after a lapse of 32 years, under 5 per cent of the people of Sydney are protected in this way.

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