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LETTERS

Surgeon John White

I read the article "Surgeon John White: Australia's first surgeon-general" [*United Service* 64 (4), 24 – 27, December 2013] with interest, but there are serious difficulties with one point covered by this piece.

Most primary evidence from First Fleet sources indicates that the epidemic that spread near Sydney in 1789 was smallpox. All qualified opinion from the First Fleet identified the disease as smallpox. While there are complexities differentiating rare, severe forms of chickenpox from modified smallpox and presumably other severe pustular infections, this aspect has no relevance to the 1789 outbreak.

This particular issue has already been dealt with. Professor Frank Fenner reviewed the suggestion that chickenpox spread from the First Fleet [*Medical Journal of Australia* 142, 278, 18 February 1985] and his analysis covers other diseases with similar presentations. Critically, Fenner noted that immunity to smallpox was found in the 1830s amongst Aborigines west of the Blue Mountains who were in the right age bracket to have been infected by the First Fleet outbreak. This immunity was reported by regimental assistant surgeon John Mair in 1832. Extracts from Mair's report were published in 1919. They were cited by George Bennett MD and are now online as part of Appendix A of J. H. L. Cumpston's *History of Small-Pox in Australia, 1788-1908* at www.tinyurl.com/cumpston pp. 150 – 154. Only smallpox could create this immunity.

Christopher Warren

Independent scholar, Canberra, 28 November 2013

Author's reply

Christopher Warren's letter is informed (Warren 2007) and persuasive. The controversy surrounding the genesis of the 1789 illness afflicting the Aborigines in the Cumberland Plain was again heightened in the 1980s. From some of the polarising evidences expressed recently, for example by Campbell (2002), to that presented earlier by Dixon (1962), Butlin (1983, 1985), and Crosby (1986), readers were left in some doubt as to the exact cause of the disease outbreak.

The late Professor Frank Fenner, an international authoritative virologist, reviewed early 19th-century primary sources, including two unpublished letters written in 1831 by Assistant Surgeon John Mair to the colonial secretary and the minutes of the Executive Council dated 3 January 1832. This information (Campbell 2002: 236) was not previously known to me. Fenner's unequivocal conclusion was that the disease that had afflicted the Australian Aborigines in 1789 had been caused by smallpox.

Bruce Short

Blackheath, 10 December 2013

References

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- Crosby, A. W. (1986). *Ecological imperialism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).
- Dixon, C. W. (1962). *Smallpox* (Churchill: London).
- Warren, Christopher (2007). Could First Fleet smallpox infect Aborigines? *Aboriginal History* 31, 152-163.

Erratum

There was an error in my article on Surgeon John White [*United Service* 64 (4), 24 – 27, December 2013]. On page 26, I stated that: "Professor John Carmody has proposed that the Aborigines suffered a chickenpox epidemic (personal communication)." While I had discussed the topic with Professor Carmody on 19 August 2011, I did not obtain his permission to cite him in the article. I retract the attributed statement and apologise to Professor Carmody.

Bruce Short

Blackheath, 25 November 2013