Abstract

In mid-April of 1958 the Government of Pakistan summoned the press to announce a grave need for international aid to cope with smallpox and cholera epidemics in East Pakistan. In response, and with the backing of the US State Department, Dr. Alexander D. Langmuir, chief epidemiologist of the CDC, led a team of epidemiologists to assist authorities in Dacca strengthen their immunization programs. Langmuir's superiors hoped for a Cold War advantage, but he saw an opportunity for trainees in the Epidemic Intelligence Service to learn about public health in a developing country. Langmuir later described the episode as a "wild and wondrous ride," but it had been more like a nightmare: the East Pakistan health department had collapsed; a popular movement had taken over vaccination and squandered vaccine supplies; hostile journalists had questioned the Americans' deeper motives; and a professional rivalry opened between the Americans and a British epidemiologist named Aidan Cockburn. By the time the epidemic subsided in July 1958, 30 million Bengalis had been vaccinated for smallpox but another 20,000 had succumbed to the disease. This episode was CDC's first sustained foreign intervention, a precursor to its extensive role in the 1970s helping WHO eradicate smallpox from Bangladesh.

Keywords

Smallpox, Vaccination, CDC, East Pakistan, A.D. Langmuir, Aidan Cockburn.