

The Needle Vs. the Pox



There was a comfortable ambiance at the SBCMS' Southern California Medical Museum on Sunday, April 25 as approximately 50 history aficionados attended the museum's 13th Annual Open House. The main focus was on, "The Needle Versus the Pox," a discussion of worldwide efforts to eradicate endemic disease such as smallpox and the Guinea Worm.

Historical Committee Chair Elliot Weinstein, MD, discussed the purpose and formation of the museum as well as its support group, the Friends of the

Southern California Medical Museum. Committee member Hans Davidson, MD, presented a brief background on how smallpox is diagnosed and transmitted.

Veteran Public Health Officer Rick Miller discussed his experiences as a member of a team that worked to eradicate smallpox in Somalia in the 1970s. They had many challenges to overcome, such as poor hygiene, infected water, malaria, and the presence of lions and other wildlife. Mr. Miller said that the earliest credible clinical evidence of smallpox is found in the Egyptian mummies of persons who died some 3000 years ago. The disease is believed to have killed an estimated 400,000 Europeans per year during the end of the 18th century, including five monarchs. As recently as 1967, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 15 million people contracted the disease and that two million died in that year. Mr. Miller showed world maps detailing the progress of the efforts to eradicate smallpox. After successful vaccination campaigns, the World Health Assembly certified the eradication of smallpox in 1980.

Mr. Miller also discussed the Guinea Worm, a parasitic infection caused by larvae of a nematode that enters the body through drinking stagnant, contaminated water. The infection is endemic in four countries in Africa. Educating people to follow simple control measures can completely prevent illness and eliminate transmission of the disease, leading to the disease's eradication. After serving several years in STD research programs, Mr. Miller became involved in efforts to eliminate the Guinea Worm in Pakistan.

As they have done in the past, members of the SBCMS Alliance provided invaluable assistance with refreshments and as hostesses and greeters.

The Southern California Medical Museum was established in 1982 to collect and preserve medical artifacts and to educate the public regarding the importance of medicine and its fascinating history. The museum is supported by donations and funds through the Physicians' Memorial, Gift and Benevolence Fund, a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization. Donations of antique medical equipment, medical books published prior to 1925, and tax deductible monetary contributions are welcomed. For more details about the museum and the Friends of the Southern California Medical Museum, visit www.socalmedicalmuseum.org or call SBCMS at (951) 787-7700.

Photo above: Rick Miller, dressed in native garb, tells of his experiences with smallpox and Guinea Worm. A Public Health Advisor for the Centers for Disease Control, he retired in 1995 from the U.S. Public Health Service after 30 years of service.