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Smallpox against Itself: Exploring the History of Inoculation in Tibet

Abstract:

Smallpox is an infectious disease caused by either of two virus variants known as Variola major and Variola minor. Before its eradication in 1979, smallpox caused more destruction and devastation than any other disease. Indeed, it was known as the greatest killer in the world (Hopkins 2002). Since there were no known treatments, prevention was the only way to manage this dreadful and destructive illness. Before Edward Jenner (1749–1823) developed smallpox vaccinations, inoculation or variolation was the only method available for preventing smallpox. Physicians would deliberately introduce smallpox by pricking the skin of patients who had not yet contracted the disease. Inoculated patients would develop a form of the infection that was less severe than naturally-acquired smallpox. Inoculations would also induce patients to have immunity to the smallpox for life.

In medical history, using the disease itself as a means to fight against the disease was a radical approach. Such a method was also considered foundational to the science of immunology. Without a doubt, whoever first thought of this approach was clearly unconventional and revolutionary. Determining where this idea originated has been highly contested among medical historians. India and China are frequently at the top of the list of candidates.

In this talk, I will present selections from some old Tibetan medical and religious texts. Relying on these selections, I shall explore how the idea of inoculation was developed in Tibet. I will also explain how it was practiced over the course of history. In addition, I will also briefly explore how Tibetan transnational trade and Buddhist networks might have transmitted ideas about smallpox treatment to India and China and perhaps also to Europe.