

Edward Jenner (1749 - 1823)



Edward Jenner ©

Fact File: Edward Jenner (1749 - 1823)

Edward Jenner made the first breakthrough in understanding and combating infectious diseases.

He was born in Berkely, Gloucestershire on 18 May 1749, the son of the village vicar. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed to a local surgeon and then went on to train in London. In 1772 he returned to his home town and practises medicine there for the rest of his life.

At the time, smallpox was a terrible scourge that killed many people, particularly children, and Jenner was determined to find a cure for the disease. He based his ideas on the local folklore that dairymaids, who suffered the mild disease of cowpox, never seemed to contract the deadlier smallpox. In 1796 Jenner carried out a risky experiment on an eight year-old boy, James Phipps. Jenner inserted pus taken from a cowpox postule and inserted it into an incision on the boy's arm. He repeated the experiment on several other children, including his 11 month old son, none of who caught smallpox. In 1798 he published his results and coined the word 'vaccine' from the Latin word 'vacca' for cow.



1802 caricature of Jenner vaccinating patients who feared it would make them sprout cow like appendages.

He came in for a lot of ridicule from people who thought inoculating a human with an animal disease was abominable. However, the obvious benefits of using a vaccine won the day and it soon became widespread in the nineteenth century.