

Obituary: Professor Frank Fenner (1914–2010)

On 22 November 2010, the renowned and iconic virologist, microbiologist and public health champion, Professor Frank Fenner died at age 95 in Canberra. Best known internationally as the person who led the eradication of smallpox, overseeing the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication in the 1970s and 1980s, Fenner's work and achievements in medical science had a strong focus on population and public health locally and internationally.

During World War II Fenner was involved in a drive to control the impact of malaria on Australian troops serving in New Guinea. He was awarded an MBE for his effective management of malaria, which significantly reduced casualty rates among foot soldiers.

Fenner's expertise in virology developed working alongside Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne after the war. He applied his proficiency in pox viruses, including smallpox and myxoma, with a focus on public and population health concerns. As well as more than 10 years working with the WHO to eradicate smallpox, Fenner offered the viral disease myxomatosis as a solution to the damage that Australia's wild rabbit plague was wreaking on local agricultural production. In 1952 he, along with colleagues Burnet and Ian Clunies Ross, went as far as injecting themselves with the virus to prove its safety in humans despite its efficacy among the rabbit population.

These high impact achievements have been nationally and internationally recognised. In 1988, Fenner was awarded the most prestigious applied science award – the Japan Prize – for achieving smallpox eradication; and became a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1989. Fenner's significant contributions were also commemorated in a state memorial service in Canberra, held on 2 December 2011. A continuing drive in the field of public health saw Fenner working beyond retirement, at the Australian National University's School of Environment and Society – which he founded in 1973. His continuing research activities were prolific, as demonstrated by the hundreds of research papers published and authorship of textbooks. In addition, Fenner

actively supported Australian research and researchers, preferring to publish in local journals, mentoring Australian researchers and hosting an annual Australian Academy of Science Fenner conference (collaborating with the *Bulletin* to publish conference material locally). In recent years the conference has brought to the fore issues such as health in the built environment and health in the face of climate change. An additional aim of this ongoing annual conference is to support talented young researchers early in their career.

With regard to climate change, Fenner did not hold the optimism of many scientists and politicians, but believed that ever growing populations and food shortages would bring increasing social upheaval, famine, war, and eventually the end of human kind.

In accordance with Fenner's demonstrated dedication to research aimed at improving human wellbeing and benefiting society, the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, the Hon Mark Butler MP, has announced a new National Health and Medical Research Council fellowship, the Frank Fenner Early Career Fellowship, to commemorate Fenner's extraordinary contribution to science and public health. The Fellowship will benefit researchers in the field of international health early in their career, with the first award to be announced in 2011.

Fenner's achievements are captured more fully in the following obituaries:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/8152284/Professor-Frank-Fenner.html>

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/frank-fenner-who-eradicated-smallpox-and-ended-rabbit-plague-dead-at-95/story-e6frg6nf-1225958840687>

http://www.theage.com.au/national/the-man-who-killed-smallpox-dies-at-95-20101122-1845h.html?from=age_sb

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/scourge-of-smallpox-and-rabbits-was-a-genuine-hero-20101122-1848g.html>

Alana Lessi for the Bulletin