

IMAGINE CORONAVIRUS 100 TIMES WORSE

In the March edition of the Warrandyte Diary I talked about the smallpox plague of 1789. It was spookily prescient of the situation we now face with Coronavirus and I will continue the theme.

Nowadays, social media can spread information (or misinformation) about important events, but back in 1789 the Australian social media was song, dance and message-stick. It was essentially the same in medieval Europe, when wandering minstrels sang witty songs to local audiences, about the political or social news of the day. The nursery rhyme 'Ring a Ring a Rosie' was for instance about the 14th century Black Death Plague. The first sign of the plague was sneezing, and we all still say 'Bless you' because you were as good as dead if you sneezed.

When the smallpox pandemic suddenly and inexplicably broke out in Sydney in early April 1789, the suffering was catastrophic. Australia had been a disease free environment and not even the common cold was present. Suddenly, people became feverish and pus filled sores broke out all over their bodies. They suffered in indescribable pain for about ten days then died in relentless numbers.

First Fleet officer David Collins visited some campsites with his native friend Arabanoo and graphically recorded the following:

'...those who witnessed his expression and agony can never forget either. He looked anxiously around him in the different coves we visited; not a vestige in the sand was to be seen of a human foot; the excavations in the rocks were filled with the putrid bodies of those who had fallen victim to the disorder; not a living person was anywhere to be met with. It seemed as if, flying from the contagion, they had left the dead to bury the dead. He lifted up his hands and eyes in silent agony for some time; at last he exclaimed, 'All dead, all dead' and then hung his head in mournful silence.'

Smallpox had scourged Europe over the whole of the eighteenth century, so the First Fleet doctors were well practiced in quarantine procedures. History therefore proudly records that 'no white man died of the plague' after it broke out in April 1789. However it spread inexorably along the coast and through the river systems to reach every corner of Australia.

The spread of the disease was also unwittingly aided by the social media of the day. In Sydney a song was created, replete with ghoulish shrieks and groans to convey the pain and suffering involved. Messengers were sent out with the song to warn other tribes. The only problem was the messengers had been incubating the disease and passed it on with the song.

It is a standard protocol in traditional Australian society that a song is never translated when it is learnt. It must always be sung in the language of the people who created it. So imagine my surprise in finding that Jimmy Dawson, an early settler at Warrandyte in 1840, had recorded the words of the smallpox song that had originated in Sydney. Jimmy has shifted to Part Fairy in the Western District in 1844 and began a lifelong process of documenting the cultural information he was given. The chilling words of the song (without the ghoulish shrieks and groans) are translated as follows:

*Red hot Echidna spikes are burning me
Piercing me until pain overwhelms me
Comfort me my sisters
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull*

The fact that this original song was recorded in the Western District of Victoria, some sixty years after the plague had swept through, is testament to the accuracy of Aboriginal oral history conveyed in story and song. All that is required is some basic understanding of the cultural symbolism embedded in the story.

Some historians have opined that the smallpox plague never reached Victoria, but this is at odds with Aboriginal oral history. The Woiwurung language people of the Melbourne area recount the legend of the Mindye and describe the devastation wrought.

The Mindye is described as being a ten mile long, serpent like creature with the head of a dog, a mane and the tail of a possum. It spat poison and moved at such speed it was invisible, but the poison was in the dust that followed. The pock marks left on any survivors were referred to as 'the cups of the Mindye' and other scarring as 'the scales of the Mindye'.

In my 2016 book 'The Dust of the Mindye' I estimated that the death rate from the 1789 smallpox was around 90% of the Australian population. With a minimum base population of three million, that means the death toll was at least 2 ½ million Australians. It is a sobering comparison to our present predicament.