



interesting discovery: Hazelbrook's Dr James Branley, Head of Infectious Diseases and Microbiology at Nepean Hospital, with co-author, Dr Kath Weston of Glenbrook.

Uncovering our colonial past

Two Blue Mountains residents have played crucial roles in telling the story of colonial Sydney's first public health campaign following the discovery of a smallpox vaccine specimen in archives.

Two small glass specimen slides that were sealed, wrapped in a piece of paper and sent to the then NSW Governor more than 170 years ago, have been unearthed in government state archives, and form the basis of a research paper published this month in the *Medical Journal of Australia*. The slides — believed to contain one of the oldest samples of vaccine against the deadly smallpox virus — and the accompanying correspondence dating back to 1841, were discovered by accident in the archives.

But they proved to be vital clues that help to illustrate the origins of public health initiatives in Sydney.

The slides were originally sent to NSW Governor Sir George Gipps, as evidence of a supply of vaccine material to

protect the young colony from the scourge of smallpox.

When the specimen was discovered at the State Records Authority in Kingswood, western Sydney, in November 2010, it was transferred to the Public Health Unit at Nepean Hospital in Penrith where Glenbrook resident Dr Kath Weston was working as a senior infectious diseases surveillance officer.

As a precaution, the specimen was analysed by experts led by microbiologist Adjunct Associate Professor James Branley of Hazelbrook, from Pathology West and Director of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases at Nepean Hospital, and tests conducted at Westmead Hospital confirmed it did not contain the smallpox virus.

But Dr Weston and Dr Branley, both with an interest in the history of infectious diseases, were intrigued by the find and decided to explore deeper. Their subsequent research through the National Library led to the uncovering of a series of

letters between Gipps and doctors in the colony. The exchanges paint a picture of the early steps taken to protect against smallpox, which led to the inception of the state's first public health authority.

Dr Weston, now a senior lecturer in Public Health at the University of Wollongong's Graduate School of Medicine, details the historical significance of the find in an article co-authored by Dr Branley, and Wendy Gallagher from State Records Authority of NSW, published in the *Australian Medical Journal* last month.

"This is a story which demonstrates the importance of vaccination — not only for protecting against a terrible and deadly disease, but also in ridding the world of that disease," she said.

Coincidentally, the vaccine sample was found in the same week as the death of Australian Sir Frank Fenner, a celebrated public health champion of the global eradication of smallpox.