Smallpox: the fight to eradicate a global scourge

By David A. Koplow


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Since the eradication of smallpox two decades ago, the debate over whether to destroy the remaining vestiges of the variola virus has continued. David Koplow, in his scholarly treatise Smallpox: the fight to eradicate a global scourge, presents a comprehensive analysis of the historical, scientific, social, ethical, and political arguments that have shaped the debate. A Professor of Law at Georgetown University and former Deputy General Counsel for International Affairs at the US Department of Defense, Koplow methodically explores the arguments on both sides of the debate, ultimately concluding in favor of preserving the remaining known vials of the virus. His book should be read by all scientists interested in microbiology and by those who wish to opine on the subject of smallpox. It should also not be ignored by government policy makers who will decide the fate of the known remaining stocks of smallpox in the United States and Russia.

Koplow initially dissects the medical, scientific, and military issues that underlie the wide variety of policies and attitudes concerning smallpox. He describes the magnitude of the “variola problem” by recounting the history of the rise and fall of this disease and the unprecedented achievement of the World Health Organization in eradicating it. For the nonscientist, Koplow provides an overview of virology and of the theoretical possibility that molecular manipulations of viral DNA could result in an even more lethal form of smallpox than previously seen. Next, Koplow presents the historical prece-