

Program: The Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918

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Attendance: 120

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Between January of 1918 and December of 1920 the greatest natural disaster of recorded time took place. Estimates suggest that 50-100 million people died, about 3 to 6% of the world's population. This pandemic has been referred to as "The Spanish Flu" of 1918. The title is a bit of a misnomer, as the pandemic, which existed from April 1918 until October 1919, did not originate in Spain. In addition, there is still some controversy as to whether it was "influenza" or not. Pandemic refers to a global disease, while epidemic could be the same disease, but does not occur on a global scale.

Most of the information referencing our understanding of this pandemic was obtained from only a few cities, as record keeping was poor or non-existent in most countries in Europe and limited in the United States.

Influenza "flu" is a viral disease that has symptoms that include high fever, severe pain, headaches, hacking cough, and general malaise that can carry on for several days. Healthy people typically recover within two weeks, but they may have a lingering cough. Those most susceptible are under 5 and over 65 years old. Winter is the typical period for most flu problems.

The symptoms and spread of the "Spanish Flu" were similar to regular flu - contagious, airborne, muscle aches and pains, etc., but mortality was greater and people died quickly, often in as little as 24 hours, and sometimes within six hours. The most disturbing symptom was that people turned blue or black when they died due to the lack of oxygen and had foamy blood coming out of the lungs. This was different than any other flu seen before with the result of people drowning in their own bodily fluids. Furthermore, this disease affected not only the young and old, but people in their 20s and 30s, an oddity not seen before with regular flu.

During the 18-month period of this pandemic, one-third of world's population caught this disease. It has been estimated that 50 to 199 million died worldwide after being recently revised upwards. More specifically, 700,000 died in US and 10,000 died in Indiana. Other countries did not fare much better, but poor record keeping limited our understanding of the magnitude of the pandemic. For example, 17 million died in India, 390,000 in Japan, and 14% of the entire population of Fiji died.

The "Spanish Flu" came in four waves and at odd times of the year in comparison to the "typical" flu: April 1918; August 1918; Spring 1919, and September through October 1919. The first wave began in Haskell, Kansas in March and April 1918. From there a soldier on leave to Haskell took it back to Camp Funston where soldiers readying for WWI were infected. This created what was believed to be

a vector for the transmission of the disease as soldiers were shipped off to Europe. During that first wave for example, 25% of prisoners at San Quentin were infected, while 1000 workers were sent home from Ford Motor Works in Michigan in a single day. The flu spread to Europe hitting Spain in June, India, and China during that summer. Because Spain was not involved in the war at the time, they did not censor their newspapers. Consequently, they reported the flu in their papers and it was given the name "The Spanish Flu". In four short months, it spread around the world.

Over summer of 1918, the flu mutated. It got much more virulent and started killing people much faster. Two weeks after it was first identified (September 1) in Boston, 6,674 cases were reported. By Sept 20, 800 were hospitalized, 90 died in a day, and by Oct 20, 17,000 at Fort Devin died of the flu. Panic ensued when the general public saw the multitude of soldiers getting sick and dying. Moreover, hospitals and healthcare professionals were overwhelmed, further aggravating a bad situation.

The 2nd wave is best shown by using Philadelphia as an example. After the Liberty Loan parade in the fall, the disease spread quickly. By the first week in October, 700 had died. Each week for the next three weeks, approximately 4500 deaths were recorded. There was a shortage of doctors and nurses, and the disease took its toll of healthcare workers. Morgues filled rapidly, with the result of mass graves being used to bury the dead. One of the significant aftermath problems were the multitudes of orphaned children.

In San Francisco, a law was passed that required the wearing of surgical masks, which didn't help, due to the still primitive science of germ theory. Schools, theaters, churches, etc. were closed in an effort to reduce the transmission of the disease. New and unique, but useless or worse, treatments were used including Horlick's malted milk powder and inhaling formaldehyde. At the time, no treatment was available for the flu.

The 3rd wave existed between December 1918 and January 1919. This wave was much less virulent, but spread easily with crowds of people at significant gatherings such as the elections, Christmas celebrations, armistice parties, etc. In addition, returning soldiers spread the disease. This wave also headed to rural areas, and in Alaska, it wiped out entire towns. Fortunately, the flu never spread to the interior because of the isolation of some areas.

The 4th wave existed at the time of the Paris Peace Conference in the spring of 1919. Woodrow Wilson was ill with the flu, and his influence at the conference was thought to have been compromised, as he was limited in how well he could negotiate.

Although the "Spanish Flu" was limited to 18 months in duration, far more people died of this flu than in the war to end all wars – WW1. This flu was also believed to have some long term effects, including: encephalitis lethargica, leukemia, and Parkinson's, and was assumed to be related to many other diseases.

Because of the toll on life due to the cumulative effects of disease and war, the people who lived through this era were known as the "Lost Generation". They often followed Hedonism or a live-for-the-moment lifestyle and failed to plan well for the future. The "Return to Normalcy" really didn't happen, and the whole world had changed during a short period in our history.



Dorothy Pratt