

Spanish flu outdid WW I in number of lives claimed

Peter Wilton

This year, which marks the 75th anniversary of the Armistice Day that ended World War I, is also of note for a less positive reason: the arrival of the Spanish influenza.

By the fall of 1918, victory by the Allies was all but assured, but thoughts about the war's imminent end brought little joy to the medical profession, whose attention was focused on a new world killer that was proving to be more lethal than any of the weapons used in the 4 years of war. The virus was dubbed the Spanish influenza because Spain was the first country to report an epidemic in 1918.

The World War I battlefields proved to be an ideal home for the virus and it spread quickly through the labyrinth of trenches, infecting both armies. By late summer of 1918, influenza was having an impact on the war. Some battles were postponed, and the German war effort was hamstrung when major supply lines to the front began to falter as cities fell to the flu.

Influenza was affecting both peace and war efforts. At a key point in peace negotiations in Versailles, Woodrow Wilson, the US president, took sick. The onset of symptoms was so sudden and se-

vere that poisoning was suspected, but the culprit was the Spanish influenza. The flu left Wilson in a weakened physical and mental state that had a direct bearing on the final form that the flawed peace treaty took.

In North America, influenza had a devastating impact on both the US and Canada. The citizens of both countries had enjoyed a certain immunity during the war years. Although troops, supplies and financial aid were sent by both to bolster the Allied war effort, the Atlantic Ocean provided a buffer that protected Canadians and

Americans against the carnage of the European war. In the new war against influenza, however, the Atlantic Ocean could provide no protection.

As the troops began returning from the front late in 1918 and early in 1919, many brought the Spanish flu with them. As well as causing flu's typical aching joints, dry cough, running nose and possible diarrhea and nausea, the Spanish flu added one deadly twist: many of its victims also contracted pneumonia, which often proved fatal.

In the US, it is estimated that

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Seattle police sought protection from the flu

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500 000 people died from Spanish influenza between March and December of 1918, and another 20 million were sickened by it. Gauze masks became a common sight as people sought protection.

In Canada, the impact was no less devastating. Arriving with the returning troops, the flu followed them to every corner of the country. Quebec was hit particularly hard — 535 700 people were infected and 13 800 died, including 3000 in Montreal. At the peak of the epidemic in Montreal, a trolley car was adapted to carry coffins to the cemetery because city hearses were unable to meet demand; the trolley car could carry 10 coffins at a time.

The Spanish flu did boost the popularity of telephones, which were still relatively new. People began to rely more heavily on them to maintain contact with family and friends, and made fewer visits to friends' houses; many church groups and public meetings were cancelled until the threat of the epidemic subsided.

Bell Telephone, already under labour strain due to the number of sick operators, made a public appeal that people refrain from using

the phone unless absolutely necessary.

Toronto's chief medical officer likened the influenza to a cyclone that arrived suddenly, caused a vast amount of damage and destruction to everything in its path, and then was gone as suddenly as it arrived. In Toronto, 1682 people died from the Spanish influenza between Oct. 9 and Nov. 2, 1918. One of the virus's characteristics was that the greatest number of deaths occurred in people aged between 20 and 39 — the same age group that paid so heavy a price during World War I.

The Prairie provinces watched the disease progress across Eastern Canada. With railways providing the only practical way to enter the provinces, health officials felt that the influenza outbreak could be controlled by monitoring the trains and placing infected passengers in isolation as soon as they disembarked.

Winnipeg's immunity from the Spanish flu came to a dramatic end on Sept. 30, 1918, when three infected soldiers returning from the war arrived at the Winnipeg train station. Although they were immediately placed in a conva-

lescent isolation hospital, it was too late. A man working at the railway contracted the virus. Three days later, two of the soldiers were dead, as was the first civilian to be infected in Winnipeg.

By January 1919, the death toll had mounted. In Winnipeg, there were already 12 863 reported cases of Spanish flu, and 824 people had died; the death toll was also rising in rural Manitoba. In Carmen, Man., three of four doctors contracted the flu. The remaining physician, A.E. McGavin, inherited his colleagues' caseload and became solely responsible for patients in a 64-km radius.

His son, Percy, was 7 at the time of the influenza outbreak and remembers clearly his father working 24-hour days, trying to make the rounds to all patients in the area. He also remembers that his father was meticulous about trying to totally disinfect himself after seeing a patient. He was determined not to become yet another carrier of the virus. The disinfection process must have worked, because nobody in the McGavin household became ill with the flu.

Worldwide, it is estimated that in 1918 and 1919, between 20 million and 25 million people were claimed by the Spanish flu — in a few months the virus had claimed more people than were killed in the 4 years of World War I.

Science's first major victory in combatting influenza did not occur until the early 1930s, when Dr. Richard Shope isolated the flu virus, thus allowing development of vaccines.

Today, the gauze masks that many people wore at the height of the 1918 epidemic have been replaced by annual vaccination campaigns that have reduced the number of cases of flu-related illness. But influenza should not be taken lightly, even today — it still claims the lives of about 5000 Canadians, most of them elderly, every year. ■

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