

# Spanish flu: the pandemic to end all pandemics?

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**The 1918 Spanish flu — caused by the same virus as swine flu — killed at least 50 million, many times more than the First World War. We delve into the Times archives to find out how Britain coped**

Tom Whipple

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February 20, 1919 and a reader has contacted the Editor of *The Times* to give advice on the most pressing matter of the day. “Sir, the simplest, easiest and cheapest precaution is to use salt water for gargling the throat and rinsing the nostrils,” he says, before adding, for the benefit of those unfamiliar with nose-rinsing techniques, “fill the hollow of the hand and ‘snuffle’ the mixture.”

For less sturdy readers, the *Times* doctor sums up the scientific consensus on defeating influenza: “The good effects of wine continue to be emphasised, and most agree in selecting port as the best of these,” he says. An advertisement in the paper extols the benefits of mustard baths.

The Spanish flu pandemic that began in 1918 was the gravest medical disaster of the 20th century, comparable in scale only to the great plagues of the Middle Ages. Over the course of two winters, a third of the world’s population became infected with the H1N1 flu virus — the same subtype as the current swine flu. Propagated by troops leaving the trenches and exacerbated by those cold winters, it spread to every continent. Woodrow Wilson, the US President, suffered from its effects while negotiating the Treaty of Versailles. Gustav Klimt, the Austrian painter, died in the first wave, aged 55. As with swine flu today, the virus seemed, unusually, to affect the young, fit and healthy.

By the summer of 1920 an estimated 50 million people had died. The toll from the preceding four years of bloody mechanised warfare in Russia and France, when the world’s great powers had applied their finest minds to the challenge of killing each other’s troops in the most efficient way possible, had been 15 million. For two years the failed attempts to control the disease and deal with its disastrous effects filled the pages of *The Times*.

The first report on “the Spanish epidemic”, on June 3, 1918, was placed on page 5, between progress updates on the Western Front and a speech in which President Wilson argued that “the spectacle of 20 nations battling against the forces of evil is evidence that Christ still rules in the hearts of men”.

The article states: “The unknown disease which appeared in Madrid a fortnight ago spread with remarkable rapidity. Owing to its benign character it was at first, together with its victims, the subject of much badinage and pleasant writing in the newspapers. Today the complaint has passed the joking stage.” The correspondent says that there have been 700 deaths in ten days.

Very soon, the epidemic would cease to be a foreign news story and 700 deaths in ten days would cease to be newsworthy. But before the pages of *The Times* became grim death-rolls — tables compiled across the country, recording city-by-city mortality — there was a “phoney war”, a time for theorising and analysis.

“The man in the street, having been taught to take a keener interest in foreign affairs, discussed the news of the epidemic which spread with such surprising rapidity through Spain a few weeks ago, and cheerfully anticipated its arrival here,” writes a *Times* columnist, who goes on to discuss possible causes of this mysterious illness. “He [the aforementioned “man in the street”] is sometimes inclined to believe it is really a form of pro-German influence — the “unseen hand” is popularly supposed to be carrying test tubes containing cultures of all the bacilli known to science, and many as yet unknown.”

Any fantasies that the Spanish flu was really a German bio-weapon of last resort were soon lost, however, in the daily grind of dealing with yet more death even as the allies continued fighting on the Western Front. On November 7, 1918, four days before the end of the war, *The Times* published an article headlined “Rise in influenza death-roll”. It follows the same template as dozens of articles in preceding months, and dozens in the months after. All that changes is the numbers.

Beneath the sub-heading “Over 7,000 last week” is a table with two columns simply labelled “last week” and “previous week”. Prefixing these with the word “deaths” is no longer thought necessary. “London County, 2,458; London outer ring, 1,705; Sheffield, 465; Leicester, 260; Hull, 220 . . .”

Many of the deaths were preventable, had pre-NHS hospitals been able to cope. *The Times* observed in February 1919 that pneumonia cases were being turned away for lack of space: “We cannot afford to lose 100,000 of our young adult lives in 12 weeks because of the absence of hospital accommodation,” the correspondent argued. Some wards had to close because all the nurses had flu.

Although popular remedies to combat flu may have involved mustard and Bovril, the world was still in a far better position to understand and mitigate the effects of the disease than it had been the last time it faced a pandemic. Advances in scientific understanding in the late 19th century meant that doctors understood the theory of germs and viruses and how they spread disease. Scientists still lacked the expertise to isolate and identify the pathogen but they knew how to avoid it. *The Times* advised its readers: "Infection is by contact, coughing, sneezing and even loud talking. The poison can be projected as far as 10ft from the infected host in this manner, hence the importance of overcrowding." As with swine flu in Mexico, the authorities recommended the use of masks and took measures to prevent large gatherings of people.

But a sterner early 20th-century medical establishment would have looked dimly on the measures taken last week in Devon, where a school was closed after a possible infection. "It has been necessary at some schools to close several departments, but that is for administrative reasons owing to a shortage of staff," Britain's chief medical officer told *The Times* in late 1918. "We are still of the opinion that the children are no more likely to fall victims of the illness in well-ventilated schools than they are running about the streets or packed together in picture theatres."

*The Times's* medical correspondent, meanwhile, grumbled that "the recent Tube strike has no doubt played a part in lowering public resistance . . . for long walks have had to be undertaken by tired-out men and women who . . . have been forced to face the ordeal on empty stomachs."

As the virus finally receded, taking with it much of the Great War generation, people searched for whatever lessons they could find. *The Times* reported on a lecture at the Royal Institute of Public Health, where Captain Thomas Carnwath argued for the general use of face masks. "If people had learnt to use umbrellas, he did not see why they could not also learn to use masks," we wrote.

In closing, Captain Carnwath made another, perhaps more prescient, suggestion. Newspapers, he said, had "for a long time had a City page dealing with matters financial. Why not a health page, under a responsible editorship?"

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