

The influenza pandemic of 1918 history essay



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It is historically one of the most horrifying epidemics of mankind. Medical researchers were running out of ideas; it was the worst feeling that the medical field could have ever experienced. The deadly virus demonstrated the inferiority of human inventions (American Experience: Influenza 1918). In 1918 there was an outbreak that started to kill thousands of Americans and millions all over the world. "The Influenza Pandemic" also known as "Spanish Flu," a virus that caused sickness, death, and sorrow. This contagious virus is a very dangerous respiratory infection and which often ended in Pneumonia (Turkington, C; Ashby, B). The effects of the virus that caused the influenza pandemic of 1918 resulted in mortalities and then preventive measures, which had a tremendous impact on history, mainly on World War I.

Influenza appeared as the most serious pandemic episode that occurred, causing devastation, to every part of the world. The main reason for the spread of this disease is considered to be World War I. It is believed that the influenza pandemic spread quickly to the military personnel through the United States ships that were traveled around North America, Europe, and to other continents that helped spread the disease rapidly throughout the world.

History and Origin of the Disease

The Influenza Pandemic took place during World War I in 1918. The main cause of this disease in the United States was due to military ships traveling to foreign countries and carrying it back to the U. S. There were three waves of infection during 1918-1919. Through research done, the first wave started in the spring of 1918 in the United States. The second and the third waves

spread around the world in the fall and winter. These waves were the most lethal (Taubenberger, Jefferey K. and Morens, David M.). During the first wave of the influenza pandemic, military and government leaders didn't acknowledge the disease. The reason for this was fear that the cost of health care would take money away from the war. Because of their negligence the countries involved in the war didn't take the proper precautions against the flu, leading to the devastation of the second wave. The government was putting all the money toward the war which caused a lack of healthcare. As a result many men on the battlefield were getting the infection and dying. This forced the government to devote more money to healthcare which affected our lead in the war (Billings).

Influenza Symptoms

The Influenza Pandemic was an infectious disease that involved fever, chills, coughing spells, skin that turned deep blue, extremely red eyes, and phlegm. The sense of panic and hopelessness impacted many communities (Palese).

The poor living conditions and the agglomeration of many soldiers contributed to the quick spread of this disease. Another serious issue that affected patients was the fatal inflammation of the respiratory tracts. Symptoms include developing brown spots over their cheek bones turning to a bluish color of the face, coughs that brought up blood stained sputum. Postmortem examination indicated swollen lungs, filled with fluid, and a bluish color; in the matter of days people were put in bed which resulted in pneumonia and death followed (Mann).

Outbreak and Geographical Spread

It started on a military base near Boston, in 1917 Dr. Victor Vaughan who was a medical lieutenant in the medical reserve corps, was promoted to the rank of major. He was assigned to the duty with the Medical Division of the Council of the Washington, D. C. In 1918, the mobilization of many soldiers during World War I brought into the country a mysterious virus. Different Camps were opened up during the war; soldiers were to travel frequently and when they return to the camps, it was in a filthy condition. Dr. Vaughan was assigned to find out where the virus was coming from. In a camp known by the name of " Camp Devens," 11 ½ million Americans were sent across the Atlantic during the war, most of them from Kansas. When it was time for them to return, they did it carrying some kind of virus. All of a sudden American soldiers, English soldiers, French, and German, became sick. It was like the microbe mutated and spread in a matter of days.

Researchers still aren't clear how the three waves of the influenza pandemic started to spread, and how fast it went. Studies also show that the spread occurred during the spring-summer, summer-fall, and winter over the Northern Hemisphere. However, the second wave impacted the Northern and Southern Hemisphere (Taubenberger, Jefferey K. and Morens, David M.). The table bellow shows the points of the waves of how the Pandemic started and its course around the world:

Figure 1: Starting point of the waves of the Pandemic

(Digital History Archive).

Influenza effects during the War

One day in November 1918, Army soldiers started to complain of fever, headaches, and a simple sore throat; by noon, the Army hospital was saturated with more than one hundred soldiers experiencing same symptoms. In a week more than 500 cases were registered at the same hospital. By spring 1918, forty eight soldiers were dead. The effects presented during the war were devastating, American soldiers were dying and doctors couldn't find the cause of it. In September 1919 Doctor Victor Vaughan had special orders to visit the Camp, during his visit he discovered hundreds and hundreds of young men lying in bed. The appearances on the young soldiers' faces were bluish, and they were constantly coughing. During Doctor Vaughan's visit 63 young men died. Nevertheless, soldiers were still being deployed and were carrying the disease from one military base to another. The microbes were spreading quickly, due to the agglomeration of the soldiers, giving the opportunity to these people to inhale the contaminated air (Barry).

According to scientific research, it doesn't take long from one case to turn into ten thousand cases. One major factor that contributed to the rapid spread of the Influenza Pandemic was the government and the civilian authorities; they believed that war was the priority, other than the epidemic that was spreading around. Their thoughts and beliefs were concentrated on one thing " the war" and it was more important to them than putting people in quarantine to avoid the spread of more cases.

The spread started from Boston, to New York City and by September 11, people collapsed on the streets. It was hard to avoid the inevitable the

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influenza was in the country. However, the military was asking for more soldiers, and a quick decision needed to be made by the superiors. They knew that if they put more soldiers together in a big ship, the result would end in a catastrophe. Despite that, they sent out the order to send more soldiers. Meanwhile, civilians were supporting the war; all they wanted was to fight for liberty and to keep it. They agreed with their military husbands and relatives, by marching on the streets. As a result hundreds of people walked together in parades exposing themselves, by gathering together and breathing on each other, they were infecting each other. Before long, Philadelphia was contaminated and it all happened in a matter of minutes. People started to die, and there was nothing to stop it. Panic started to fill the environment; it was like everyone almost knew that death was knocking at their doors. Children were so scared, a kind of fear that no one could ever experience..... They could feel it; they could smell it, children would sing about it...in which every word would chill people to the bone and it sounded as:

“ I had a bird and its name was “ Enza”

I opened the window and In-Flew-Enza...” (Hoeve).

Statistics show the devastating rate of death which occurred in a period of five months. The total was about 675, 000 people who died of influenza due to complications. Nevertheless, the negligence of the government along with the armed forces, who completely ignored health care policies and procedures, were one of the major factors of this horrible outbreak. Recklessness that later turned into a health care crisis.

Influenza: Treatments and Preventive Measures

The Influenza virus started to spread quickly, and before long, the virus was all over the country. A National crisis was declared. Treatments, health care and all possible measures were taken to try to prevent the virus. People were required to wear masks in public. All public gathering was prohibited; city schools were closed as were businesses, theaters, and bars. The Medical field was trying to find a vaccine to kill the virus and to cure everyone. All they knew was that influenza was caused by a virus. What they didn't know at the time was that results were going to be devastating. Studies show that this particular virus was too little to be seen; which complicated the process of finding a cure. People started to understand the beginning of this infectious disease. Quarantine and isolation were some of the measures taken. Nothing was working, people started to use their own home remedies, such as turpentine on sugar, kerosene on sugar...they believed that a few drops in any drink would help (Barry). Drinking plenty of fluid also helped, aspirin was used for headache, pain and fever. Bed rest, and nourishment were recommended, cold compresses on the forehead and warm drinks were used to comfort the patient. Other remedies were cinnamon and milk to reduce fever. If the disease progressed to pneumonia, then that was treated accordingly.

Influenza Epidemic Mortality Rates

When the Influenza arrived to the United States, it came in waves. The most deadly pandemic waves of influenza within 1 year occurred in rapid sequence. According to statistics this epidemic disease killed many healthy young adults. Young adults between 20-40 years-old were susceptible to

influenza. Also children 5-14 of age were an easy target during the pandemic of 1918, with the only difference being the rate of mortality was lower from influenza and pneumonia than other age groups. However, studies show that from 1900-1917 the 5-15-year age group had 11% of total influenza cases, at the same time the 65-year old group had 6% of influenza cases. Yet, in 1918 the percent rate in children 5-15 of age group increased to 25% of influenza cases

(Taubenberger, Jefferey K. and Morens, David M.).

Figure 2: “ U-” and “ W-” shaped combined influenza and pneumonia mortality by age at death, per 100, 000 persons in each age group. United States 1911-1918. As you can see influenza and pneumonia specific death rates are pointed in this graphic for the inter-pandemic years 1911-1917

(Dashed line) and for the pandemic year 1918 (solid line) (33, 34)

Economic Effects during the Influenza Pandemic

The pandemic influenza during 1918, didn't affect only the country socially but economically as well. Businesses were impacted from the decreased labor force as a result of the influenza. The increased percentage of the death rate was high and considered excessive.

The large number of people suffering and dying had a psychological affect on everyone (Garrett). This situation produced negativism among the population causing distress and hurting economic growth. For instance, studies found that during the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and 1919 the adult death rate was a significant factor of unsuccessful businesses. The labor

market's productivity was affected; the epidemic was taking men 15-44 of age and this unquestionably interfered with the fecundity and structure of a family for years after the epidemic. In addition, let's not forget that pandemic outbreak was also complemented by World War I.

The effects of the virus caused by the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 resulted in mortalities. It is important to understand that when certain viruses start to appear, it is necessary to do the respective studies and find preventive measures. Despite the fact that we are humans, who make mistakes; a mistake as significant as this one, which took so many lives is unacceptable. The devastation and the cost of many innocent lives taken by this virus was a too high a price to pay.

The negligence and other interest of the government and military officials allowed the disease to spread so quickly. In a short period of time, it turned in a devastating and uncontrollable outbreak. The influenza had a tremendous impact, not only in the military field, but to civilians as well. The damage caused by the Influenza Pandemic in 1918 affected the country in an economically, and socially aspects and the high rate of mortality hurt the economical production in the country. All the same, the virus came into an unprepared country, a country that was fighting war, in which it had to face a virus but this time a virus that doctors couldn't stop from spreading. Finding new solutions and preventives measures should have been their medical field's priority but they responded late, ending it in one of the worst pandemics in our history.