

THE SPANISH FLU PANDEMIC 1918 THE MOST DEVASTATING PANDEMIC IN WORLD HISTORY



The dead were lifted out of houses on their sleeping mats, their mats wrapped around them and they were deposited in one great pit at a place called Vaimea.

This scene was replayed time and time again as the Spanish Flu pandemic ravaged the islands of Samoa for two months from November, 1918 as reported in the press during that time.

The highly contagious virus spread rapidly around the islands of Samoa. As people breathed, coughed and sneezed, the virus infected people without warning.

The outbreak was called "Spanish Flu" because Spain was the first country to report the virus. It recorded the highest number of deaths within the shortest period of time allegedly killing around 8 million people.

In the Pacific, the deadly virus was believed to have been carried into the region onboard the SS Talune, which anchored in Apia on 7 November 1918. In less than two months after the arrival of the ship more than 7542 people were dead, almost 25% of the entire population of Samoa.

The SS Talune had anchored in Auckland in preparation for the voyage to the Pacific. Two weeks before its departure, the SS Talune was joined in Auckland by a ship from Vancouver that carried a large number of passengers and crew horribly sick with flu. Some of the ill died on board during the journey. Those surviving were admitted to Auckland Hospital whilst some remained isolated onboard.

Two weeks later, the SS Talune called at ports in Samoa, Fiji and later on Tonga and Nauru, carrying goods as well as flu-stricken people on board. As a result, it left a wake of death and destruction in the countries that it called on.

PUBLIC NOTICE

In view of the severity of the present

Epidemic of Influenza

and in order that all efforts may be concentrated on the stamping out of the disease, the local Board of Health, after consultation with Kingston Medical Society and the Mayor, has enacted that after Oct. 16th, and until further notice,

1. Theatres and Moving Picture Houses shall be closed and remain closed.
2. Churches and Chapels of all denominations shall be closed and remain closed on Sundays.
3. All Schools, Public or Private, including Sunday Schools, shall close and remain closed.
4. Hospitals shall be closed to visitors.
5. No public shall be admitted to courts except those essential to the prosecution of the cases called.
6. The Board advises the public most strongly not to crowd into street cars and to avoid as much as possible any crowded train or an assembly of any kind.

Provisions have been made by the Kingston Medical Society whereby all cases applying for assistance will receive the same either by registered practitioners or by final year medical students acting under instructions. Therefore every case of illness should send in a call to a physician.

A. R. B. WILLIAMSON,
Medical Health Officer.

Fiji is thought to have lost about 9,000 people, 5% of the island's total population, Tonga may have lost 16% and Nauru 6%.

Guam also experienced a terrible blow of the outbreak after a military transport ship arrived in October 1918 from Manila, carrying with it flu-infected passengers. Within a month, about 5% of Guam's total population died of this deadly flu.

Tahiti was also badly struck by the flu epidemic, reportedly losing one fourth of the population.

In the two years that this pandemic ravaged the earth, a fifth of the world's population was infected. Unlike other pandemics, which mainly affected the elderly, the Spanish flu was most deadly for people aged 20 to 40.

The Spanish flu outbreak appears to have occurred in three waves: the first was from May to July 1918, the second wave during September to December 1918 and the third wave from February to April 1919. The largest number of deaths was recorded in the second wave. There are indications that the virus may have become less severe over time: countries that were able to delay the introduction of the virus by a few months tended to have lower mortality rates.

Source:

(The Pacific Perspective has been adapted from Kupu, S. 2005. PPHSN guidelines for influenza preparedness and control and influenza pandemic preparedness. Noumea, New Caledonia: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.)



In 1918, children skipped to the rhyme:

I had a little bird
Its name was Enza
I opened the window
And in-flu-enza

A Military Doctor's Account

Excerpts of copy of a letter found in Detroit by Professor N R Grist (Glasgow) published in the British Medical Journal of 22-29 December 1919:-

"Camp Devens, Mass.
Surgical Ward No 16
29 September 1918
(Base Hospital)

My Dear Burt

Camp Devens is near Boston, and has about 50,000 men, or did have before this epidemic broke loose. It also has the Base Hospital for the Div. of the N. East. This epidemic started about four weeks ago, and has developed so rapidly that the camp is demoralized and all ordinary work is held up till it has passed. All assemblages of soldiers taboo. These men start with what appears to be an ordinary attack of LaGrippe or Influenza, and when brought to the Hosp.

They very rapidly develop the most vicious type of Pneumonia that has ever been seen. Two hours after admission they have the Mahogany spots over the cheek bones, and a few hours later you can begin to see the cyanosis extending from their ears and spreading all over the face, until it is hard to distinguish the coloured men from the white. It is only a matter of a few hours then until death comes, and it is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible. One can stand it to see one, two or twenty men die, but to see these poor devils dropping like flies sort of gets on your nerves. We have been averaging about 100 deaths per day, and still keeping it up."