The Pandemic of 1918: Its Impact on Public Health in Maine and Beyond

The original design and layout of the exhibit was on a standard black tri-fold board.

**Thesis/Historical Argument:** The Spanish flu of 1918 dramatically affected the way we view pandemics and broke barriers in forming public health policies at both local and global levels.
The first ever diagnosed victim of the Spanish flu was at a Kansas military base, Fort Riley, on March 11, 1918. On that morning, Private Albert Gitchell complained of a fever, headache, and sore throat. By day’s end, over 100 men were admitted to the camp hospital; many died. Just 12 hours after the first diagnosis, cases were reported across the country.
The Spanish flu struck at an especially inopportune time. Because of World War I, boats and trains were packed with soldiers, providing optimal conditions for the flu to thrive. It spread rapidly between the soldiers; when they reached their destinations, they began to spread it to others. In addition, the war efforts took many U.S. doctors overseas. This left many domestic hospitals understaffed during the crisis.

“That’s how quickly it happened; they disappeared from the face of the earth.”
- William H. Sardo, Spanish flu survivor
Healthcare Before the Spanish Flu

Before the Spanish flu, people believed that good hygiene could prevent all disease. Upper class people believed that poor people were to blame for getting sick at higher rates. Doctors were a luxury and were not required to report to the government. This meant that once officials realized they had an epidemic, it was too late to start using quarantine as a form of containment.

“Nurses were overwhelmed with numbers of patients, either at the hospital, at home, or in the field, yet they continued to do their job in the face of overwhelming numbers” (UPENN School of Nursing).

Nurse tending to a victim of the Spanish flu in Washington, 1918, Library of Congress
“The 1918 influenza pandemic was the most severe pandemic in recent history” (CDC).

**Breaking Barriers in Public Health**

- Recognition of epidemiology, the study of disease patterns to prevent the spread of future infectious diseases, as a science
- Virological analyses and development of preventative measures
- Founding of the League of Nations Health Organization, precursor to the World Health Organization, in 1920
- First U.S. health census implemented demonstrating an increased interest in population based medicine
- Shift to socialized medicine in many countries; wider access to healthcare supported by governments

Sign on preventing the influenza, 1918, Library of Congress

Poster advising how to stay healthy, 1918, National Archives
Impact in Maine

The Spanish flu killed about 1% of Maine’s population forcing rapid advances in its public health policies.

The following were instituted:

- Information distributed in public places
- Anti-spitting and gathering restriction laws enforced in Portland, Bangor, and Lewiston
- The Bureau of Health founded to respond to future public health crises.

The urgent demand for more hospital beds in Portland led Reverend Bishop Louis Sebastian Walsh to initiate construction of Mercy Hospital in December 1918.
Soldiers in Lawrence, Maine, 1918, Bettman Archives
Influenza camp patients are given the treatment of fresh air.

A news storefront in Portland, Maine, 1918, Maine Historical Society
Posters about the Spanish flu demonstrate its significance in Portland, Maine.

Spanish flu victims, 1918, New England Historical Society
Hospitals were overcrowded due to the Spanish flu; overflow centers were erected.
Comparing the Spanish Flu and COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of First Confirmed Cases</th>
<th>The Spanish flu of 1918</th>
<th>COVID-19 (As of May 15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fort Riley, Kansas</td>
<td>506,000,000 (7% of the world)</td>
<td>4,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuhan, China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms</td>
<td>High fever, aches, sore throats, coughs, bloody sputum, and bluish tinted skin, sometimes with purple blisters</td>
<td>Cough, shortness of breath, fever, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, loss of taste/smell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Cases World-Wide</td>
<td>29,400,000</td>
<td>1,450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Cases in the U.S.</td>
<td>47,000</td>
<td>1,565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Cases in Maine</td>
<td>50,000,000</td>
<td>384,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths World-Wide</td>
<td>675,000</td>
<td>86,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths in U.S.</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths in Maine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Risk Populations</td>
<td>People in their prime health</td>
<td>Older adults, underlying conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>Isolation, quarantine, personal hygiene, disinfectants, public gathering restrictions, masks</td>
<td>Isolation, quarantine, personal hygiene, disinfectants, public gathering restrictions, social distancing, masks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of totals as of May 15, 2020, Worldmeter

“Still, as in 1918, we will remain dependent on a mix of biomedical interventions and social distancing measures when the next pandemic strikes” (Wendy E. Parmet).
“Without public health capacity building and disaster preparedness around the globe, each novel disease outbreak means 'reinventing' public health policy.” (Wendy E. Parmet).
"That after September 28th, no assemblage or gathering shall be permitted or held in theaters, moving picture houses, or dance halls within the City of Portland, and no other unnecessary assemblage or gathering of people shall be permitted or held within said City. Public schools shall also be discontinued."

The Portland Board of Health, 1918

"Gatherings of more than 10 people are prohibited throughout the State. Gatherings subject to this Order are those that are primarily social, personal, and discretionary events other than employment. Such gatherings include, without limitation, community, civic, public, leisure, and faith-based events; social clubs; sporting events with spectators; concerts, conventions, fundraisers, parades, fairs, and festivals; and any similar event or activity in a venue such as an auditorium, stadium, arena, large conference room, meeting hall, theatre, gymnasium, fitness center or private club."

Governor Mills, March 2020