

The Great Flu Epidemic of 1918 - Part I

Lead: A case of the flu is considered by most people a minor irritant, the subject of humor, the excuse to take off a day or two from work, one of those occasional hardships of life that must be endured. In the winter of 1918, however, the flu was no joke.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Influenza is a virus, a clever survivor, ever vigilant for opportunities to mutate and spread. Many experts believe that the flu virus lives harmlessly in birds. On occasion flu viruses from birds infect pigs,

whose immune system then attacks the virus, causing it to mutate. The new virus created in this process is then passed to humans and, depending on the conditions, an outbreak may not be far behind.

While localized eruptions of the flu are fairly common, periodically, some say every 30 to 40 years, a flu epidemic breaks out which can be an international event. If a disease is widely spread and affects populations throughout the world it is called a pandemic. Huge numbers of people are infected and a great many may die. Influenza pandemics have occurred at least three times in the twentieth century: the Hong Kong Flu in 1968, the Asian Flu in 1957, and the Great

Influenza Pandemic of 1918, commonly known as the Spanish Flu. Recent research has shown that it might properly be called the American Flu.

Both the Hong Kong and Asian outbreaks were found to have mutated in pigs. Now scientists at the Armed Forces Institute, after examining the preserved lung tissue of a soldier who died of the flu in the spring of 1918, have concluded that the so-called Spanish Flu came from American pigs, infected American soldiers, and was spread by U.S. military personnel deployed throughout the world during World War I. Next time: The ironic last great gift of the god of war.

**At the University of Richmond, this
is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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