

# The 1918 influenza pandemic

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# MCH, 2012e

Following the pandemic speculation continued over the *Niagara* in New Zealand. The Department of Public Health was also heavily criticised. The government responded by setting up a royal commission with wide powers of investigation.

It fell to Robert Makgill, acting Chief Health Officer, to implement the Commission's recommendations. One of the recommendations, which Makgill had argued for, was for a new Health Act 'to consolidate and simplify the existing legislation'. Historian Geoffrey Rice describes the resulting Health Act 1920 as 'the most useful legacy of the 1918 influenza pandemic'. The legislation:

... was so well drafted that it survived with only minor amendments until the 1956 Health Act, which itself still followed the general pattern of the 1920 Act. At the time it was widely recognised as a model piece of health legislation, said to be the best of its kind in the English language.

## Remembering the pandemic

As the government took steps towards improving the health system people began to return to their ordinary lives – often without parents, husbands, wives or other family members.

Considering the number of lives lost during pandemic it is surprising that the event has not had greater 'prominence in national histories and public monuments'. Geoffrey Rice suggests that its 'mark on the collective memory may have been more distinct' had it struck during peacetime.

The pandemic was certainly remembered by those that lived through it. Visit our media gallery to read and hear some of their recollections. These are taken from a 1967 radio documentary produced by Jim Henderson and entitled *The great plague*. None of the interviewees are named in the documentary.

Two statues erected in Canterbury to honour doctors who died during the epidemic, Dr Little at Waikari and Dr Margaret Cruickshank (New Zealand's first woman doctor) at Waimate, are among the few public monuments to the victims of the pandemic.

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