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New Zealand Disasters

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Influenza Epidemic

October - December, 1918, New Zealand-wide

What happened?

- The First World War came to an end on 11 November, 1918, but at the same time an influenza epidemic was sweeping around the world. It was known as the Spanish Flu, or the 'plague of the Spanish Lady', but the infection did not begin in Spain.



<<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc6/IMG0093.asp>>

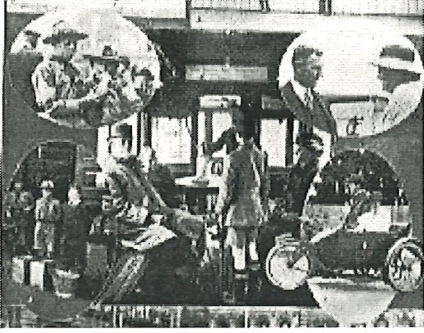
A returned soldier in a motorcycle sidecar taking food to patients during the 1918 influenza epidemic [1918] <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc6/IMG0093.asp>>

It was thought that part of the reason it spread so rapidly was because it was carried by soldiers returning from the trenches of France to other more isolated parts of the world, such as the Pacific Islands.

- One of the troop ships returning to New Zealand was the Niagara, which arrived in Auckland on 12 October, 1918, carrying the Prime Minister, William Massey, and the Minister of Finance, Joseph Ward, who had been in Europe.
- On board there were a number of cases of influenza. A member of the crew had died, 100 other crew members were ill, and 25 passengers were seriously ill and in need of hospital care.
- The ship was not placed in quarantine, and it was later felt that if this had happened, the influenza would not have spread so far or so quickly. However, there were already cases of illness in Auckland and other troop ships were returning from Europe, the source of the infection.
- By November there were reports of outbreaks of flu in other parts of New Zealand. But the Department of Health still had not restricted travel around the country, and the infection kept spreading.
- People came down with the symptoms of the flu very quickly, sometimes collapsing within matter of hours, and even dying the same day.
- The only way to avoid catching the virus was by keeping out of contact with other people.

were no flu vaccinations available, and no antibiotics for those who fell ill.

- One of the worst effects of the influenza was on the lungs, which could lead to pneumonia, and more often than not, death. Infected patients found it hard to breathe, and often there was not enough oxygen in their blood. Because of this some of the victims turned a purple-black in colour after they died.



<<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc6/IMG0094.asp>>

A tramway inhalation car

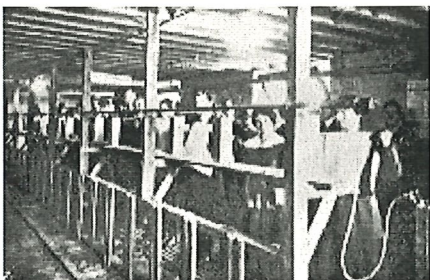
[1918] <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc6/IMG0094.asp>>

Inhalation chambers were set up so that people could breathe in fumes which were supposed to help clear their lungs. This method of prevention was not proved to be effective, and by bringing people together, it may have helped spread the infection.

- Between one third and a half of the population of New Zealand was infected with the flu. In some places the death rate was as high as 80% of the town's population, while in others there were very few deaths.
- Military camps, where the soldiers were crammed together in their living quarters, had higher death rates than places where living conditions were less cramped.
- Many doctors and nurses were overseas with the military forces, and back home many fell ill themselves. Medical supplies began to run low.
- Hospitals became full very quickly, and emergency hospitals were set up in schools and church halls, and even in tents in some places. Soup kitchens were organised to feed those people unable to help themselves.
- At the height of the epidemic in November, for 2-3 weeks, ordinary life was impossible. Shops, offices and factories shut down without enough staff to keep them going, and schools, hotels and theatres were closed by order of the government.
- Because shipping from port to port around New Zealand came to a halt, many towns suffered from a shortage of basic supplies, such as flour and coal.
- In some places it became impossible to hold proper funeral services for the victims of the influenza. Many undertakers and grave diggers were ill, and the numbers too many to deal with. Coffins were made by volunteers.
- By December the worst of the epidemic was over, and many who were ill began to recover.

How many died?

Over 8,000 people died from the influenza epidemic in New Zealand.



<<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc2/IMG0052.asp>>

People using the inhalation chamber in the Government Buildings in Cathedral Square, Christchurch [1918] <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc2/IMG0052.asp>>

Other events and outcomes

- During the First World War <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/WarsAndConflicts/>>, 16,688

New Zealand soldiers died in four years of fighting.

- The influenza epidemic killed at least 6,413 European New Zealanders, including the soldiers who died of the flu overseas - a death rate of 5.8 per thousand deaths.
- One estimate of the number of Māori deaths, which were not always accurately registered, gives 2,160 - a death rate of 42.3 per thousand deaths.
- Because officials were worried that public confidence could suffer if the high number of deaths was known, they did not release the official figures. Instead rumours grew and many people believed there had been an official cover-up of the real death statistics.
- It is likely that one reason for the rapid spread of the virus was because large numbers of people met together to celebrate the end of the war. In Christchurch, Carnival Week brought hundreds of people into the city.
- There was an Epidemic Commission in 1919 to investigate the cause and course of the epidemic. Afterwards there were major reforms in the health system, the most important being the 1920 Health Act.

• **Pandemic**

A disease epidemic, which spreads across the whole of a country or the whole of the world.

This was the world's worst recorded pandemic of influenza, in just four months killing more than 25 million people, or over twice the number killed in the fighting of the First World War. The other major disease epidemic in history was the Black Death of the fourteenth century, in which an estimated 55 million people died of bubonic plague in the course of four years.

- The influenza epidemic became New Zealand's forgotten disaster, as people tried to forget the horror of the First World War.

Sources

- The influenza epidemic <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Catalogue/Keyword.asp?influenza+epidemic+Boon>> Kevin Boon
- New Zealand's heritage <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Catalogue/Keyword.asp?ti+New+Zealands+heritage>>, Vol. 6. Wellington, [1971-73]
- Black November: the 1918 influenza epidemic in New Zealand <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Catalogue/Keyword.asp?ti+Black+November+the+1918+influenza>> Geoffrey Rice

More information

- Search our catalogue for more about Influenza Epidemic, 1918-1919 <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Catalogue/keyword.asp?su+Influenza+Epidemic+1918+1919>>
- Gallery of photographs of the 1918 influenza epidemic <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/LocalHistory/1918Influenza/>>
- 1918 Influenza Epidemic - How Christchurch Coped <<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/LocalHistory/1918Influenza/>>
- The 1918 Flu Pandemic <<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/influenza-pandemic/>> - includes sound files of interviews with survivors. By NZHistory.net.nz