

## 1918 INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC 100 YEARS SINCE: could it happen again?

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Halifax was just recovering from the major disaster of the December 6, 1917 explosion when next hit with the devastating influenza epidemic in which more died than the explosion and in WW1. The idea of confinement/isolation, hygiene practices were yet to be a common practice. So more died because of the below practice than being shot in battle.



RESULTS of HALIFAX EXPLOSION, DEC.6, 1917



It wasn't long after the flu outbreak that the hospitals were filled to overflowing.



The flu spread quickly because when the infected soldiers returned from Europe they were not quarantined and those ill were sent to Cogswell Street hospital in Halifax or to their homes across Canadas. Doctors, nurses and the general population were not equipped with knowledge to combat this ferocious disease. Isolation techniques were just being developed along with controlling infectious disease with vaccines, not until about the 1940's. The Spanish Flu started with a virus in wild ducks, spread to pigs and then to humans. Pneumonia was the main cause of death and known as 'the blue death'.

The flu actually started in the military in Kansas, February 1918, quickly spreading to French and British armies. Another route to Canada was through the fishermen from Boston who carried it to Yarmouth. Because of the wartime censorship, this hindered the news of the infection being broadcasted. So the extent of the disease was kept quiet and out of the newspapers in Europe and North America but Spain was neutral during the war, their papers were full of the extent this epidemic was causing, thus came the term – Spanish Flu. By September 44 had died of the flu and no longer could it be kept quiet and the population panicked.

The Federal Government responded by making Dr. Frederick Montizambert (1843-1929) the first Director General of Public Health in Canada in 1918 and also the quarantine officer for Canada. He was also the first Canadian Deputy Minister of Health, responsible for setting up 'quarantine' places across Canada to help prevent the spread of the flu which was killing 1000 per day. By October 1918, 50,000 Canadians died between 1918 and 1919, more than during the WW1. He connected bacteriology to disease, the first to do so. He has been installed into the 'Canadian Medical Hall of Fame'. Quarantine stations were set up at William Head, Vancouver Island, Grosse Ile, St. Lawrence and on Lawlor's Island in Halifax Harbour where he sent 2000 Doukhobours from a ship which just landed at Halifax full of ill passengers. Ill servicemen returning from WW1 were sent to Cogswell Street hospital, in Halifax.



*Walter Wilson, VG graduate of class 1929, was quarantined on Lawlor's Island for three months as he nursed three patients with smallpox. He was sent because he had experience dealing with infectious diseases. He was a staff member of Camp Hill hospital where he worked in medicine, surgery and infectious diseases. He retired in 1969. Walter died in Glace Bay, 1982 at the age of 78.*

Lawlor's Island was closed in 1936 as a quarantine area after functioning since 1866.

The law was passed that everyone in public was to wear a mask but this was difficult to monitor and many refused to do so. Vaccinations were just being thought of and the public did not have confidence in the vaccination system anyway. It wasn't until the 1940's that the flu vaccination was truly used with about 40% of the public being vaccinated. Also, recently, a public health campaign was instituted to teach the public to cough and sneeze into the sleeve and not your hand as was previously taught (by your mother) as the incubation period can be 2 to 7 days.



With these techniques the recent epidemics of SARS and H1N1 were effectively controlled in Canada e.g. with N1H1, January 2010, only 426 died in Canada with numerous being infected.



Many lives were saved in Halifax and the province in 1918 because of the quick decision to close all public places for six weeks. This decision was made by the Mayor- Dr A. Hawkins, Norman McKay- Chairman Health Board and W. Hattie- Chief Medical Officer.

There was 'a turn-around in giving assistance' as this time, 1918, Boston required medical assistance, so it was pay-back time for when Boston sent help during the Halifax Explosion, 1917. The Victoria General Hospital sent nine nurses and a couple of doctors to

Boston. Eveline Pemberton, the Night Supervisor and eight other nurses were sent to Boston on the request for additional nurses.

(Eveline Pemberton started the Graduate Nurses Association of Nova Scotia in 1909. Eventually through a legislation act in 1920 allowing the designation of RN. Eveline is considered the first RN in Canada)



Ethel Redmond, VG graduate, class of 1918, had two unusual experiences during her training; the first, nursing severely injured victims from the Halifax Explosion of December 6, 1917 and the second in the Fall of 1918 when influenza broke out in Boston and neighbouring communities. Ethel Redmond was the only undergraduate sent but she was a senior student. They reported at State House in Boston and were taken to areas where the need was the greatest. Ethel Taylor and Ethel Redmond were taken to Anna Jacques hospital in Newbury Port. They remained there for 10 days and were then moved to Amesbury where the Town Hall had been organize as a 'make-shift' hospital.

Another VG graduate assisted with the epidemic in Massachusetts, Christine H. McInnis, in the class of 1918. She received a special Citation from the American government for her nursing abilities during the epidemic. Christine was called 'The Nightingale of Nova Scotia'.



After 10 days in Boston, the VG hospital recalled Ethel Redmond back and asked her to go to Lockport, NS where there were about 800 ill people and dying at the rate of 15 per day. Being involved in all the dying as a student nurse was very traumatic for Ethel but she survived and due to her 'good nursing care' managed to save several as well as herself from getting the flu. Reta MacDonald, class of 1917, and Mrs. Pugh accompanied Ethel Redmond to Lockport. Ethel received a Commendation from the hospital for her dedication in the care of these ill patients in Boston and in Lockport. (Actually all the nurses who went to Boston were recognized by the US government for their assistance) Ethel Redmond was the first Treasurer of the Victoria General Hospital School of Nursing Alumni in 1920 and a founding member.

Unfortunately the epidemic had a negative effect on the staff of the VGH as three nursing students of the VG School of Nursing died during their training days from this influenza epidemic in 1918: Etta Clarke, Merna Baker and Agnes Cox, all promising future nurses.

Also one Registered Nurse, Lottie Flick class of 1917 died while on duty at the VG from the influenza epidemic which she picked up from nursing patients. During the Halifax Explosion she was posted to assist Bertha Archibald, the Pharmacist and when the explosion occurred she was covered with glass but only received minor cuts. They both continued to work well into the night as they prepared medicine for the many victims, as blowing wind and snow came through the broken window. They had to work with their coats on but their hands were cold making it difficult to work.



