

Book: Flu: the story of the great influenza of 1918 and the search for the virus that caused it

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Book Review

In this easy to read book, author Gina Kolata has captured an important and forgotten period of the Nation's history. There are few Americans that can recall the events of the flu of 1918 and the panic, sorrow, and death it left in its wake. A virus that infected over twenty-five percent of the U.S. population and resulted in a worldwide death toll estimated at 20 -100 million in just one year.

Flu offers a sobering opportunity to study an actual account of a biological incident within the United States. Although not launched as a biological warfare agent, much can be gained from a historical review of how the public, governmental authorities, and scientific community responded to the 1918 flu. It is a book that appeals to a broad audience, it can read for: personal interest (to study history or better understand family history); improved professional knowledge (for better understanding of this unusual flu strain); or for practical application (for those who may be called upon to plan for, or respond to, a large scale biological outbreak).

Normally the flu does not conjure up the same fears as other major biological agents such as Ebola, anthrax, smallpox, the Black Death; and yet the 1918 influenza surpasses every other biological outbreak of the 20th century. Twenty-five times deadlier than ordinary flu strains, it not only attacked the young, elderly, and infirm, but also ravaged those traditionally resistant members within the population; the strong and healthy 20 – 40 year olds. Its timing could not have been much worse; the epidemic spread quickly across country as the nation was embroiled in a world war. In Philadelphia alone, over 11,000 people died in the first month, causing public health systems, hospitals, transportation systems, and mortuaries to become quickly overwhelmed.

The search for the cause of the outbreak is itself an intriguing and colorful account. The search began in 1918 with a series of tests designed to infect sixty-two US Navy Sailors who agreed to serve as medical subjects in order to trace the flu's transmission process (the Sailors were to receive full pardons of their criminal sentences... if they lived). The search is picked up again in the early 1950s when scientists reasoned that the virus could be found in the lungs of Eskimos who had died from the flu and had been buried in the frozen earth. The author then proceeds to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) where modern science uses polymerase chain reaction (PCR) analysis to isolate portions of the virus itself in an attempt to reconstruct the flu's genetic code. In spite of all of the research, questions still linger over the source and potency of the 1918 flu.

Tucked away in the middle of the book is a superbly detailed, two-chapter review of President Ford's campaign in 1976 to inoculate the entire population against a potentially dangerous strain of swine flu - the same type of virus that was suspected of having caused the 1918 influenza outbreak. The swine flu epidemic of 1976 did not come to fruition and the nation-wide immunization program was ended after ninety days with approximately one-third of the adult population having been inoculated. The litigation process began immediately; by May of 1980, over 3900 claims had been filed seeking more than \$3.5 billion in damages attributed to the swine flu vaccine. A valuable case-study, the swine

flu account can provide important insights associated with researching, communicating, and responding to the threat of a large-scale epidemic.

Healthcare professionals will find *Flu* a timely read as the Nation considers inoculation programs to protect the citizenry against biological threats.

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