

Covid - 19

Where have we been?

Boston Sunday Globe

MARCH 15, 2020

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

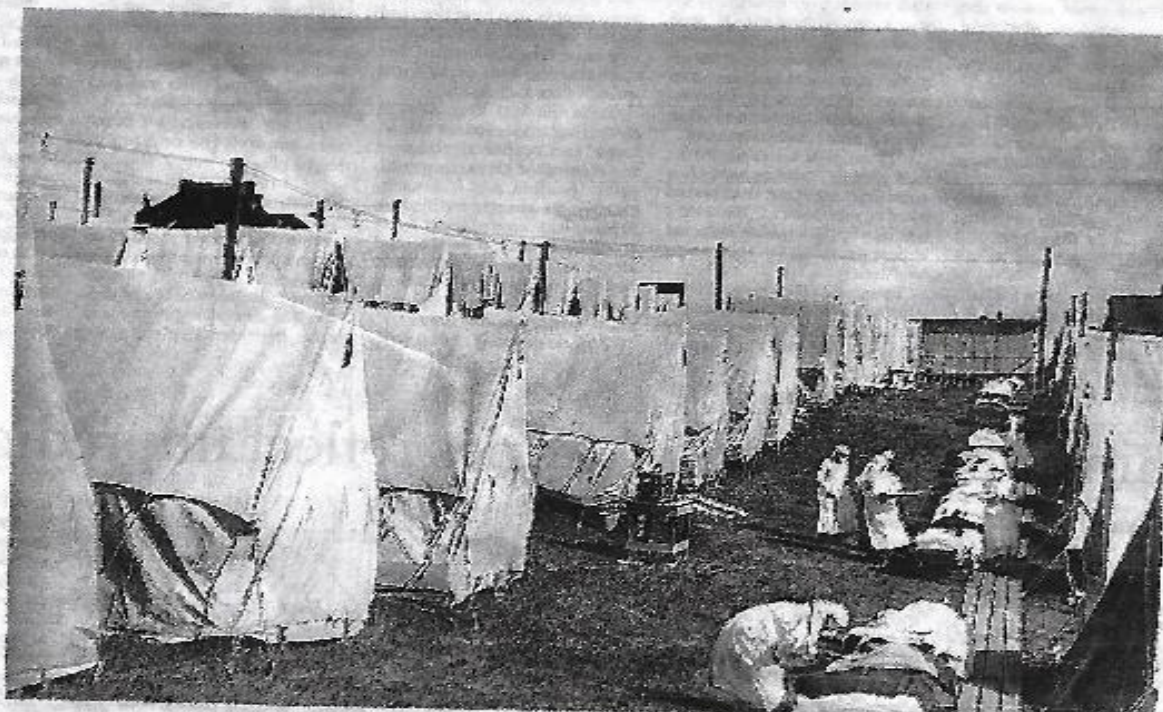


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Nurses in Lawrence cured for Spanish flu patients in 1918. In just weeks, thousands in Boston and beyond were infected.

IN THE GRIP OF AN EPIDEMIC

Boston's reaction to a dangerous and contagious virus hasn't changed much in a century: A narrative of the Spanish flu in the city where it began.

By Dugan Arnett
GLOBE STAFF

As August 1918 wound to a close in Bos-

ton, slugger Babe Ruth, would soon be playing for their fifth World Series title. And a new school year was rounding into form.

What is now the South Boston Seaport, fell terribly ill, no one in the city paid much

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thousands all over Boston and beyond were infected, with more falling ill each day. Public gatherings were shut down, hospitals overwhelmed. Daily death tolls soared above 100. And even as authorities argued over the seriousness of the outbreak and how to contend with it, the sickness known as Spanish flu lurked into a virulent and terrifying wave that would sweep from Boston across the country and ultimately kill millions around the world, casting a shadow of fear that would span a generation.

As the outbreak of the novel coronavirus now unfolds in Boston, sparked by an international business meeting at a waterfront hotel so far from where the first sailors fell ill a century ago, the contours of the Spanish flu outbreak in this city are eerily familiar. The particulars of the two illnesses are different — so far, at least, the 1918 pandemic appears far more lethal — and 102 years of medical advances have improved treatment dramatically. But the public reaction seems barely to have changed.

In both cases, national and local leaders initially diminished the seriousness of the viruses. In both cases, initial attempts to limit the seemingly instantaneous spread proved wildly unsuccessful.

And in both cases, the city was paralyzed with a sudden sense of fear and uncertainty.

In those final, blissful days of August 1918, however, no one yet saw what was coming.

"The malady appears to be in the nature of old-fashioned grippes. No deaths have occurred. The medical authorities who have the matter in charge are doing everything humanly possible to control the outbreak." — Dr. John S. Hitchcock, head of the Massachusetts Department of Health's division of communicable diseases, Sept. 5, 1918

"The risk of COVID-19 remains low in Massachusetts. Our health care workers, institutions, and public health partners across the Commonwealth are consistently treating for the possible emergency of flu season. Massachusetts is prepared for this potential outbreak." — Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, Feb. 20, 2020



NATIONAL ARCHIVES/REUTERS



ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES H. HARRIS

At top, Spanish flu patients in Kansas were crowded into an emergency hospital at the height of the pandemic. Above, a worried child watched over her sister, who had the flu, in November 1918.

Where are we now?

Observations

- Avoidance, disbelief – foreign, stigma
- Initial delay
- Conflicts internationally
- Fears mount, confused leadership
- Conflicted public policy
- Initial preparations, Risk communication
- Cases grow globally, slowly, then here
- Elderly vulnerable, deaths mount
- Schools, colleges, medical schools close
- Markets react – impacts felt
- Precautions, quarantine, ↓ medical supplies
- Risks to medical personnel
- Ethical issues in caring for the afflicted

What are the psychiatric impacts?

The Economist

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How virus-testing works

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Where to next ?