

INFLUENZA ABROAD AND IN AMERICA

HISTORY OF DISEASE SHOWS IT TO BE ONE WHICH DEMANDS GREAT PRECAUTION

The natural history of the epidemic of Spanish influenza is still to be written. It has been a world-wide epidemic and has traveled from north to south of both hemispheres.

Among the earliest cases brought to this country were those on ships from Scandinavia. It is thought the disease was carried into Scandinavia by refugees from Russia. In Berlin the newspapers put stress upon the remarkable proportion of patients who died of "influenza of the lungs." This seems to be the form in which the disease reached our shores.

That the disease could have been kept out of our country is extremely improbable. For a limited time its advent might perhaps have been delayed, but of all the plagues of humanity this seems the swiftest and most insidious. From a single case it can spread with great rapidity, and from the fact that it affects in a less severe form a great part of the community, effective quarantine is far more difficult than is the case of a disease that prostrates all who suffer from it. No doubt multitudes go about with the influenza who think they have only a bad cold. The protean character of the malady is not the least of the difficulties with which health authorities have had to contend.

Because there was no assured knowledge of how to deal with the disease, the nation was not prepared in advance for the epidemic. When it reached the shores of America the people had to be educated to the seriousness of the disease, the means of reducing exposure to it, and the defenses of the community had to be organized. The result was that generally whatever was done was a stage too late. Places of assembly were closed only after the disease had been so widely spread that street or home might be more dangerous than church or theater. No definite system was observed. Fresh air was stressed in some places, the heating of interiors in others, with the result that the susceptible might be exposed first to overheating and then to chill with risk of a swift attack of pneumonia.

Col. W. A. Brooks, acting chief surgeon of Massachusetts, in telling of his experiences in fighting the influenza emphasized two things: First was the gravely contagious character of the disease—"the most contagious thing of which I have ever known," said Col. Brooks. "It has cost more lives in America than war in Europe has cost in equal time." Second was the apparently sure hope of speedily overcoming the epidemic if the municipal authorities, the physicians, and the public would cooperate in obeying special health regulations.

It may not be unreasonable to hope that the compensation for the misery and loss of lives caused by the epidemic there will be a substantial advance in knowledge of the disease and in methods of prevention and cure. Even the methods that have failed will deserve careful study for what they show in a negative way. Most of the material is still fragmentary, but from the reports of newspapers in different parts of the country, it would appear that widely different systems have been used, none of which have proven wholly satisfactory.

The severity of the epidemic has differed so considerably in different places as to make it rather difficult to determine how much credit should be given to the local handling of the situation in places which have escaped lightly. Then, on the other hand, figures might be assembled that seemingly show that it made no great difference what was done, or whether anything was done that the pest had to "burn itself out" like the more terrible plagues recorded in history. But modern science, even though for the time being baffled, refuses to be helplessly passive. It knows a great deal about the disease, and is able to suggest promising ways of dealing with it, despite the beliefs of absolute prevention or infallible cure.