

Spanish Flu vs Covid-19, which is the worst pandemic?



FARZANA PRIOR

*Cover: Emergency hospital during influenza epidemic,
Camp Funston, Kansas.
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SPANISH FLU VS COVID-19, which is the worst pandemic?

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ISBN: 978-3-98522-715-0

This book is dedicated to all who died because of
pandemics.

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PROLOGUE

At the time of writing this book we are all being affected, in some way or another, by the Covid-19 global health crisis. Just over a hundred years ago there was another global health crisis, in the form of the Spanish Flu. There is a lot we can learn from that crisis to help us in dealing effectively with this crisis, and with future crises.

The Spanish Flu arose towards the end of World War 1, adding to the confusion and fear of the time. The fact that the Allied Forces won World War 1, in spite of the Spanish Flu, also pushed Germany into political uncertainty, and catapulted the globe to a devastating future Second World War (World War 2). Pandemics don't only create economic unrest, but also political and social unrest.

The Spanish Flu infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands. As devastating as Covid-19 is, the Spanish Flu pandemic remains the worst in modern history. Between 1918 and 1919 there were **three waves** of Spanish Flu that swept across the globe, with World War 1 being instrumental in helping to spread the virus. While World War 1 resulted in twenty million people dying, the Spanish Flu was responsible for the deaths of fifty million people.

In 1918, the scientific world didn't even know that the Spanish Flu was a virus. They understood that it was spread person-to-person and through respiratory droplets, but they didn't have powerful enough microscopes to detect viruses. Viruses were only discovered in the 1930's.

The Spanish Flu was more infectious than Covid-19 because the symptoms appeared quickly, and the virus was more deadly. In addition, while Covid-19 targeted the elderly and sick, the Spanish Flu targeted the young and healthy.

In both cases, since there was no treatment available, the most effective control was immediate 'crowd control' as it was called then, and 'social distancing' as it is called today. This act of limiting contact between people worked in 1918, and it works today, and will work for future pandemics.

As it is with all pandemics there is tension between the biological reality of the pandemic, and the social and economic realities of the people caught in the pandemic. Biology is not changeable, but the behaviour of people is. This tension explains the absence of an early and forceful comprehensive response in 1918. Instead political leaders played down the risk to stall for time because World War 1 (1914-1918) was in a critical period and there was pressure to end and win the war.

The advice from Woodrow Wilson (president of USA, 1913-1921) was not to be concerned about this disease as it was a Spanish Flu, meaning that it was a foreign disease that infected others. It wasn't until the Fall of 1919, when a more virulent strain of the Spanish Flu emerged that Washington DC began to take the Spanish Flu more seriously.

In the absence of a comprehensive federal response, cities and states, in the US made their own decisions, and many chose the economy over public health, with deadly results. This disjointed federal response took place during the Spanish Flu as well as the Covid-19 pandemic, under the Trump administration.

During the Spanish Flu, Seattle and San Francisco ordered people to wear masks in public, whereas many other cities did not. New York City never closed schools, citing that they were cleaner than homes. Chicago police officers were ordered to arrest anyone coughing, sneezing, or spitting in public.