

Current COVID-19 Pandemic Has Many Similarities To 1918-20 Spanish Flu Pandemic, And Many Differences As Well

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
April 29 2020 11:03 AM

Comparing COVID-19 Pandemic to 1918-20 Spanish Flu

COVID-19 Pandemic
as of April 19, 2020.

58,000

Deaths in the U.S.

218,455

Deaths worldwide

1918-20 Spanish Flu

675,000

Deaths in the U.S.

50 million

Deaths worldwide

Without a doubt, the current COVID-19 pandemic has put many people on edge since the virus began spreading across in February, and in particular, March and April. Current statistics from the World Health Organization show that there are more than 3 million cases worldwide in 213 nations and territories, with 218,455 deaths. The United

States has the biggest number of confirmed cases, passing the 1 million mark, with over 59,256 deaths, far ahead of Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany, the next four nations.

And the current pandemic has brought many comparisons with the Spanish Flu pandemic that happened near the end of World War I, from 1918-19. In that pandemic, an estimated 50 million people died of complications of the disease, including an estimated 675,000 Americans.

In a history published by Illinoisnewsroom.org, a service of Champaign-Urbana based public television and radio stations WILL, the Spanish Flu entered the state at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Chicago. The virus passed rapidly through the sailors who were preparing to serve in the war, and all men were confined to the base, daily sprayings, quarantines and isolation of those who had symptoms.

The virus spread downstate, and soon, all public gatherings and social events, such as now, were banned, but bowling alleys, pool halls and saloons were permitted to remain open, dependent on whether or not enough fresh air could be circulated, which was considered a preventative measure in those times.

The flu struck so suddenly, doctors and nurses weren't sure how to handle the disease, except to wear a mask, such as today. Many schools were also closed during this time, although the University of Illinois remained open, despite high absentee rates among both students and staff. When the virus was finally brought under control, an estimated total of 23,500 Illinois residents had died from the Spanish Flu.

In some cities, the flu pandemic took on horrific results. In Philadelphia, the first case of the flu was diagnosed on Sept. 17, 1918, according to a report from National Geographic. The city started a campaign to discourage spitting, coughing and sneezing in public, but residents were reassured by the city's public health director, Wilmer Krusen, that the flu would go away in a few days. Philadelphia then held a scheduled Liberty Loan parade on Sept. 28, designed to drum up support for the troops fighting in the European theater of World War I. Krusen had insisted the parade march off as scheduled, downplaying the effects of the flu, and saying that the parade would raise millions of dollars for the war effort.

But three days later, the flu had spread considerably, and all 31 Philadelphia area hospitals were filled with patients. An estimated 2,600 people died by the end of that week. Eight days later, the entire city fell under quarantine, and an estimated 12,000 people had died by the time the flu had ran its course.

Meanwhile in St. Louis, things couldn't have been any different. The city's public health commissioner, Dr. Max Starkloff, wrote an op-ed article for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in which he urged its readers to avoid public crowds to prevent the spreading of the disease. Two days later, when the first cases of the flu were reported from a nearby military barracks, Starkloff went into action, closing schools, movie theaters, pool halls, and other businesses, and also banned all public gatherings, a move supported by mayor Henry W. Kiel. The business owners protested loudly, but the mayor and health commissioner stood firm. The flu did indeed increase, but victims were treated at their homes by a network of volunteer nurses. In contrast to Philadelphia, St. Louis cancelled its Liberty Loan parade, and it helped considerably in keeping both infection and death rates down.

Within the next six months, Philadelphia had the second highest death rate because of the flu pandemic, with an estimated 748 deaths per 100,000 people, with Pittsburgh being the highest at an estimated 807 deaths per 100,000 people.. By contrast, St. Louis' death rate was estimated to be 358 per 100,000 people, the fifth lowest in the nation. The efforts of St. Louis to enforce social distancing and stay-at-home orders had worked remarkably well. Eventually, Philadelphia issued similar bans on public gatherings two weeks later, but the damage had been done.

Today, information about COVID-19 is being spread much more easily, via social media, constant news reports and information available on internet sites. Governors across the 50 states issued stay-at-home orders, and in some cases, wearing masks has become mandatory. Governors have been holding daily press briefings that detail progress on the battling of the virus, and people are much more better informed on the disease and its consequences.

Still though, numbers are high, both throughout the state and area. In the state of Illinois, a total of 48,102 confirmed cases of COVID-19 exists, with 2,125 deaths statewide. In Madison County, there are now 318 confirmed cases with 18 deaths, while in St. Clair County, there are 434 confirmed cases, with 25 deaths. Monroe County has 67 confirmed cases, with 10 people having passed.

Jersey County is currently reporting 12 cases and one death, Macoupin County has 30 confirmed cases, Greene County has three cases, Clinton County has 90 cases and one death, Bond County has five confirmed cases, with one death reported, Montgomery County currently has 24 confirmed cases, with one death and Calhoun County currently has only one confirmed case of COVID-19.

Most doctors and researchers feel that measures such as social distancing is the key to helping reduce the spread of disease, whether it was the 1918 Spanish Flu or today's COVID-19.

"There is a valuable treasure trove of useful historical data that has only just begun to be used to inform our actions," said Stephen S. Morse, an epidemiologist at Columbia University in New York, as quoted in the National Geographic report. "The lessons of 1918, if well heeded, might help us to avoid repeating the same history today."