

Spanish Flu and the Covid-19 Virus

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While most people today are thinking about the Covid-19 virus, while staying at home or making rare trips to the grocery store, it might be useful to reflect back hundred years when the Spanish Flu swept the world and caused much suffering and untold deaths.

There is strong evidence the Spanish Flu originated in the United States and spread to Europe with

the arrival of American Troops in 1917. Others say it originated in France in 1916, or China and Vietnam in 1917. I guess we'll never be sure, but it is clear the pandemic lasted for more than fifteen months and killed 50 to 100 million people worldwide. Some 670,000 Americans died.

In Canada, the Spanish Flu killed 55,000. This is just a little less than the 60,000 Canadian soldiers who died in World War I. At that time the Canadian population was only 8 million people. In today's terms, given a population of 37 million, Covid-19 would have to kill 250,000 to be of a similar magnitude. This has not been the case. Covid-19 has resulted in only 9,000 deaths in all of Canada [death toll updated to August 11, 2020)

Initially it received little attention. Troops in the trenches dismissed it as 'three day fever'. This changed when it hit Spain and their King was infected. Because Spain was not involved in WWI, its press was not censored, so they wrote extensively about the pandemic. That's how it became known as the 'Spanish Flu'.

By the middle of 1918, although quite mild initially, the Spanish Flu had spread worldwide. It emerged as a serious death threat in Switzerland in August. From there, a second wave of this deadly flu spread widely. By September it had entered the

United States big time.

In Philadelphia, 12,000 died in six weeks. Then as suddenly as it started, it let up and disappeared. A third wave of the disease started up in January 1919 in America. It was also lethal, but not as bad as the second wave mentioned above.

In April of 1919, during the Versailles Peace Conference, President Woodrow Wilson fell ill. Although some claimed it was a stroke, it had all the symptoms of the flu. This likely contributed to the disastrous peace treaty that ultimately led to the Second World War.

After the third wave mentioned above, the virus seemed to lose its punch. Perhaps with so many people infected, a 'herd immunity' developed. It evolved into a typical 'seasonal influenza' and was never heard of again.

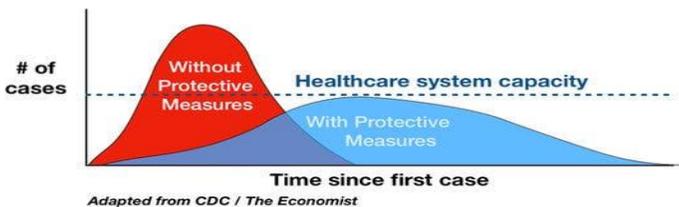


To cope with the current Covid-19 pandemic, doctors and scientists tell us we have two choices: the first being we do nothing. If we follow this path, the experts assure us our hospitals and other health care facilities will shortly be overwhelmed.

As John Derbyshire humorously noted (which I slightly paraphrase) in his recent weekly podcast, "parking lots will be full of geezers on gurneys with

no hope of treatment.” Of course, this might please the millennials in our midst, who laughingly refer to this health crisis as a ‘boomer remover’.

But no politician wants to risk hospitals being overrun, the populace grabbing pitch forks and advancing on the legislature. So doing nothing seems to be a non-starter. This has led to a different recommendation, popularly described as “flattening the curve.”



This requires people to remain in their homes, and so reduce their interaction with others who might be infected with the virus. This is popularly referred to as ‘social distancing’.

Initially, I thought this might bring the disease to a quick end, in that those suffering from the virus would be isolated from others. They would either die or get better. In either case, the virus would die off.

Apparently this is not the case. Experts claim—if

the 'curve is flattened'—the same number of people will likely be infected, but over a longer time frame. The goal is not to eradicate the virus, but to avoid overwhelming the hospitals, until a vaccine is developed or the virus dies off on its own.

The unfortunate by-product of such social distancing is a serious recession. Why? Because you are asking many businesses to lay off workers, close (all or a part of) their operation and face possible bankruptcy.

Millions of people may be without an income for months, and it is unlikely that government 'safety nets' will be sufficient, or timely enough to avoid a lengthy recession. Today a headline in the *National Post* noted over a million people have already applied for Employment Insurance benefits.

The Spanish Flu lasted about fifteen months, as did the economic impact of the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Given that this recession is likely to be more protracted, we shall be fortunate indeed, if it lasts only fifteen months.

Why? Because in this recession, we are making a conscious decision to lay off many lower-income workers (by closing restaurants, stores and isolating people at home).

Why should we expect people to reinvigorate the

economy by spending their money, when they are confined to their homes, without jobs, worried about feeding their families, paying the rent and getting back to work? Frightened people without jobs do not spend money.



Now I'm the first to admit we are facing a problem without an easy solution. We don't want the health system to collapse, or untold deaths. To avoid this, experts tell us we must be encouraged (or forced) to self-isolate, hunker-down and avoid our fellows.

But perhaps this is not the only solution. Perhaps reasonable half-measures would work as well. As Conrad Black pointed out in his *National Post* column of March 21, 2020 (which I paraphrase in part),

"Pandemics should not be managed by doctors and scientists. The North American economy ... must be incentivized to regain ... its vigour as soon as possible. The hysteria over this virus is excessive and we must not ... allow a tidal wave of small business bankruptcies that would take painful years to heal."

"Some near-normal economic activities should continue, even as this virus is brought to heel. Restaurants could be reopened with reduced seating, allowing for distance between patrons."

"Even theatres, airline travel and sporting events could be reopened using similar reasoning. It would be awkward and rather inadequate, but at least it would not be passivity and surrender. It would sustain a minimal level of economic activity in businesses that sorely need it."

"There would be some admitted risk for those who went out to eat or shop, but for those prepared to take the risk (of a nasty bit of the flu, not death), it would be a morale booster for us all."

"Many small businesses could be operated the same way, using the same reasoning, and so could factories, with a thinning of the ranks and prudent precautions."

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