PUBLIC HEALTH

Lessons from the past

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When a pandemic respiratory illness emerges suddenly and seems unstoppable, scientists and the public at large can be overtaken by events, unable to conclusively obtain even the most basic knowledge of the disease's process or prognosis.

George Soper, of the United States Sanitary Corps, describes this problem, powerfully setting forth the crucial gaps in scientific knowledge and the helpless feeling of being unsure even of how large-scale the threat is, let alone how it ends or could be stopped. The catch? He recorded this insight in 1919, as the world recovered from the ravages of the influenza pandemic of 1918.

Although there are many critical differences between the influenza pandemic and the current COVID-19 pandemic, much of Soper's article speaks directly to the present. He captures the anxiety fuelled by uncertainty, the influence of pseudoscientific theories, and the difficult challenge of changing behaviours and public life to halt the spread. Some of the specific advice for prevention (such as avoiding tight clothing) has not held up over time, and some advice (such as keeping schools open and not wearing masks) remains subject to debate. At its core, however, his depiction of events and the calls for greater hygiene and rudimentary social distancing, as well as more careful research, resonates with the present and provides eerie insight into the experience of a pandemic.

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