

Spanish flu

Cont'd from Page 19

Flu wages war on Fort Bliss

World War I soldiers, already facing death on a daily basis, were especially vulnerable to this disease, particularly living in close contact to one another. When World War I ended, about 40 percent of the U.S. Navy had been infected, and more than 4,000 soldiers succumbed to the disease crossing the Atlantic. In all, one million men, a quarter of the American Expeditionary Forces, became ill.

The Texas Historical Commission stated that more than 10,000 cases of Spanish flu were eventually reported in Texas. The flu "disproportionately" spared the very young and very old, the Commission said, but killed the healthiest members of society, those between age 15 and 45.

"Military towns like El Paso and San Antonio were hit especially hard," the commission stated in its information on Texas during WWI. "In response to the outbreak, governments at all levels did what they could to stop the spread and treat the affected... Gauze masks became a common sight on some city streets."

The origin of the Spanish flu in the United States was at Camp Funston on Fort Riley, Kansas, where "Patient Zero," a cook, may have come in contact with some infected pigs.

In 2017, Fort Riley hosted physicians, veterinarians, epidemiologists, immunologists, virologists, microbiologists, and public health experts from around the world in an interdisciplinary forum on how the flu

Flu always a health threat

Flu remains a major public health issue, especially in El Paso. The 2017-2018 flu season had 12,405 reported cases.

Fernando Gonzalez, lead epidemiologist for the City of El Paso Department of Public Health, said one of the biggest modes of means of preventing another large scale pandemic today is our access to information.

"Nowadays, we have very sensitive surveillance systems for the reporting of infectious diseases," Gonzalez said.

These systems work to update the health authorities on outbreaks and instances of infectious diseases such as the flu, so that they can react to what is happening by the hour.

Gonzalez added the creation and continual advancement of vaccinations is another difference between the influenza today versus a century ago.

"Countries have the capacity to produce vaccines for new viruses, as well as other antiviral treatments."

He noted that the responsibility still lies on the individual to practice prevention methods during the flu season.

"Washing your hands regularly is still the gold standard in prevention,"

Gonzalez said, adding keeping common surfaces clean with household disinfectants should also be done regularly.

This includes doorknobs, toys, countertops, and some things that people in 1918 didn't have to worry about: handheld and personal electronic devices.

Gonzalez said it is as important today for people with an infectious, airborne disease such as the flu to keep separated from others. Stay home from school, church, work or other social gatherings while recovering from the event, and make sure to see doctor in the early signs of symptoms.

Finally, he added, take advantage of available vaccines and get them in a timely manner. It takes two weeks for a flu vaccine to take full effect.

"Remember, no vaccine is 100 percent effective, but when you add this to practicing the other prevention methods there is a better chance of contacting a milder version of the flu," he said.

Those particularly susceptible are those with chronic diseases, pregnant women, those under the age of 5 or older than 65, and overweight individuals.

Last season, there were 21 influenza related deaths in El Paso, he said, most of which were preventable.

spread and eventually killed 2 to 4 percent of the world's population.

The Spanish flu led to the development of the flu shot in 1919, as well as more hygienic and sanitary environments for hospitals, clinics and health facilities, reported Dr. Jürgen Richt of Kansas State

University, who co-hosted the 2017 conference. "It's very important to have this historical perspective," Richt said.

Fort Bliss's size contributed to the flu's prominence in the camp.

"As World War I ends troops begin to go home and as El Paso hosts one of the

largest army bases in the U.S., Fort Bliss, El Paso was sure to be hit hard," said one website dedicated to Spanish flu history. "Soldiers began to return home to see their families and some returned home coughing and sneezing. As the Spanish flu's first stage is common cold symptoms, no one suspected anything."

Texas author and historian Mike Cox also noted that east-west railroad traffic and the routine rotation of troops at Fort Bliss helped bring the disease into the area. Even with the closures of public gathering places and the quarantines and confinements, the rising cases of flu in the area provoked El Paso officials to call on Texas Rangers to help enforce quarantines.

"Rangers Ben Pennington and Bob Hunt, along with others, were pulled from border duty to see to it that the soldiers of Fort Bliss, normally an economic asset, stayed on the military reservation," Cox said.

Hunt himself became infected and died in an El Paso hospital due to complications from pneumonia.

Daily devastation

On any given day during the epidemic, the local papers were filled with calls for doctors, death counts and funeral notices, hopeful prevention methods and treatments, and other items related to the flu.

The El Paso Herald on Oct. 14, 1918, reported an appeal by state supervisor of the draft, Maj. John C. Townes, for nurses to work at Army camps throughout Texas.

"The unprecedented situation caused by the prevalence of influenza has caused the commanding officer of the southern

Please see Page 21

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