

As the 100th anniversary of the Armistice ending hostilities in what became called WWI approaches, we reflect on war's widespread harm, far beyond the battlefields. Indeed in October of 1918, civilians far from the front were dying in great numbers.

A very virulent form of influenza had been cultivated in the conditions of WWI which then spread around the world. **An estimated 25% of the entire world population became ill. An average one out of 5 of those infected died**, although death rates were even higher in some communities that had never developed resistance to flu. A huge number perished within a short time, somewhere between **50 to 100 million**. (Remember that the world population was much smaller and records were less well kept.)

While the origin of the flu strain cannot be definitively determined, many experts believe it started in a recruiting camp in Kansas. From there, it developed to become particularly lethal. Soldiers were becoming sick in training camps, on troop ships and in the trenches, but that was kept secret from the public. Under war-time censorship, journalists were forbidden to mention the problem. Journalists were allowed to report about the flu in Spain, which was neutral in the war, and that's why it became known as the Spanish flu. (There was nothing particularly Spanish about it; the name was just another war-related deception.)

Instead of changing policies to protect the troops (and the civilians) from the spread of the flu, those in charge opted to prioritize strategies intended to win battles. Basic public health efforts might have prevented much suffering and death. Instead, those in charge betrayed the public by failing to tell the truth and precautions were not taken. They ignored medical advice that called for minimizing exposures to the virus. Recruitment could have been postponed and those with the disease quarantined instead of spreading flu around the world. Instead troop crowding continued unchanged. The conditions at the front were particularly brutal. The mixing of combatants from different parts of the globe along with their livestock is believed to have played a major role in cultivating the particular potency of the strain of flu.

When the flu returned to the states via returning troops, the strain had become quite deadly. This flu strain was remarkable in how it hit the healthiest the hardest, in effect turning their strong immune systems against them, leading to lethal complications often in just a few days. Many medical personnel, including at least 30% of doctors, were away in military service, leaving large sections of the populace without skilled medical care. Other sorts of war-time rationing also played a role, including malnourishment.

Some argue that WWI finally ended because of the flu's particular harm to German troops, not because of the fresh entrance of the Yanks. In any case, due to the great waste of life, resources, and suffering that accompanied WWI, the people of the world rose up and united in condemning war. By 1928, 15 major countries had signed the Kellogg-Briand pact* which officially made war a crime. {*Officially called the General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy. Frank Kellogg, then US Secretary of State, is the only Minnesotan who has won the Nobel Peace Prize.}

Some call this death of at least 50 million people the "forgotten pandemic." Perhaps it is an example of the amnesia that often follows extreme trauma, and can be collective in nature. Some terrible memories are blocked from conscious awareness. The theory is that the ego considers them too destabilizing to remember and so represses

them. But the body, and we the collective body, keep the score (as Bessel van der Kolk's book title notes: *The Body Keeps the Score*)

Making It Personal

A veteran-care colleague of mine has been raising the issue of the past flu pandemic and how unprepared our modern world would be for another round. It's again an issue of putting many more public resources into killing "enemies" than into improving life for the public. I'm among those who have wondered why our nation has so little memory of the great suffering. I've started paying attention.

A recent story about a WWI hero recounts how ironic it was that he survived the brutality of war only to die shortly after from pneumonia. The article didn't mention the flu epidemic, but it was indeed the secondary pneumonia that tended to finish off its victims. I suspect that history should list this veteran also as a war fatality. Along with the 50 million, it's likely he died from a war-born disease disaster, the flu pandemic.

And each death could lead to expanded harm. For instance, I remember the story in my own family about how my grandmother had never been the same after she lost her young daughter; she was rarely happy. All of us were impacted. Now I've realized that this girl died from the flu, possibly transmitted by her older Navy brother. What transpired to so alter my grandmother? Imagine with me the scenario of "everyone sick with the flu" while some suddenly died. Was Grandmother sick herself and not able to care for her daughter? Grandmother apparently felt quite betrayed by life. My grandmother's decades of dysphoria/unhappiness impacted all of us. Yet like so many war-related consequences, we families considered it just our particular problems, (if not our fault) instead of seeing the bigger picture of war's impact.

What if the war had never occurred? Were these great harms necessary? Isn't it time we started telling the truth about the consequences of war?