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Surgeon General issues instructions for coping with 1918 Influenza pandemic

By WARREN D. HUSE, For The Laconia Daily Sun
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Part 4 of a series.

LACONIA — On Oct. 4, 1918, *The Laconia Democrat* led its editorial page with the headline, “Avoid Spanish Influenza,” and declared:

“So high has become the death toll of Spanish influenza in the army and navy and citizenry of this country that the surgeon general of the army has issued rules to observe in avoiding the disease.”



(These instructions bear an interesting similarity in some respects to what is going on in 2020, while some of them seem a big quaint.)

The 1918 editorial continued:

“President Wilson urges that the directions be distributed widely throughout the country. The President will later order the directions placarded and posted in all Government departments and army and navy posts.

“The directions follow:

“How to Strengthen Our Arsenal Defense Against Spanish Influenza

“1—Avoid needless crowding—influenza is a crowd disease.

“2—Smother your coughs and sneezes—others do not want the germs which you would throw away.

“3—Your nose, not your mouth, was made to breath through—get the habit.

“4—Remember the three ‘C’—a clean mouth, clean skin, and clean clothes.

“5—Try to keep cool when you walk, and warm when you ride and sleep.

“6—Open the windows—always—at home at night, at the office when practicable.

“7—Food will win the war if you give it a chance— help by choosing and chewing your food well.

“8—Your fate may be in your own hands—wash your hands before eating.

“9—Don’t let the waste product of digestion accumulate—drink a glass or two of water on getting up.

“10—Don’t use a napkin, towel, spoon, fork, glass, or cup, which has been used by another person and not washed.



“11—Avoid tight clothes, tight shoes, tight gloves— seek to make nature your ally, not your prisoner.

“12—When the air is pure, breathe all of it you can—breathe deeply.”

In addition, the newspaper commented:

“Even the war news has been overshadowed this week by the serious development of a huge wave of influenza which has swept over the eastern United States and has been especially fatal in New England.”

Doctors “do not seem to agree as to whether the influenza is something new or merely the grippe, but the epidemic exceeds anything which New England has experienced for many years, as in many cases it terminates in pneumonia and proves fatal.”

Laconia industries “are affected to a considerable extent by the epidemic but with the preventative measures which are being taken it is hoped this city will escape more easily that some other sections of New Hampshire.”

The average citizen “can do his bit in this emergency by staying away from crowds and taking prompt action by simple home remedies to avert threatened colds. Keep yourself in good condition and you will keep influenza out.”

In the same issue of the paper, proclamations by the state and local Committees on Public Safety echoed the severity of the situation and further emphasized measures to be taken.

Drs. True and Wrisley of the Board of Health “reported several hundred cases of grippe or influenza in the city, many of them mild enough to be mere colds.”

Superintendent J.S. Gilman said about 28 percent of the school children were absent on account of sickness, “two of the teachers sick at the Laconia Hospital and another sick at her home.”

As of Oct. 11, 1918, the epidemic of Spanish influenza showed “few signs of abating, and is still serious.”

Many “have not fully recovered from attacks of the disease and some are still coming down with it.”

The hosiery mills and other local industries “have all been seriously affected, the number of sick employees ranging from 25 to 50 per cent.”

The Board of Health “will continue to keep the lid down on public gatherings of all kinds until there is a more decided improvement in conditions.”

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Note: Information about the 1918 pandemic was taken from “The Deadliest Flu: The Complete Story of the Discovery and Reconstruction of the 1918 Pandemic Virus,” available on-line at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://tinyurl.com/stqg3tr>) and from the CDC’s “1918 Pandemic Influenza Historic Timeline” (<https://tinyurl.com/y83bp7od>).

The local references were taken from the microfilm files of The Laconia Democrat at the Laconia Public Library.



MORE INFORMATION

State Board of Health offers guidelines for surviving 1918 influenza pandemic