

[Black and white image of 5 people wearing full PPE hospital gowns and safety goggles. Text reads: Library Speaker Series; Coughing Again. Presented by Local Historian – Chrys Meader]

[The logo for Inner West Council]

[AMIE ZAR – Community History and Heritage Coordinator]

Hi. Welcome to today's history talk, brought to you by the Inner West Council Library and History. Firstly I'd like to begin with acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation.

Today we have guest speaker local historian Chrys Meader presenting and reflecting on the parallels between the historically defining 1919 Spanish flu and what we are experiencing now, 101 years later, during COVID-19 and how it's impacting on a local level.

[CHRYS MEADER]

Thanks, Amie, for the introduction. Welcome, everyone, to our podcast of Coughing Again.

"Sydney is a city of masks. From a business point of view, Sydney is dead. There is no life at all in the city. Theatres, hotels, picture shows, schools, eateries are all closed and the usually thronged streets are empty. The wearing of masks is everywhere."

No, not a description of May 2020 but of 7th February, 1919. A global pandemic of pneumonic influenza, also known as Spanish flu, had reached Australian shores in early January. It came home with the returning troops from World War One. It also came home with trading ships on our harbour. Despite having quarantines community transmission was difficult almost impossible to stop. Up to 100 million died worldwide, compared to 18 million in World War One.

Australia had one of the lowest death rates, between 15,000 and 20,000 people, stark statistics. But behind every death was a real person and there was a story to tell.

I'm about to tell you a story of how one community coped, its losses and how they got over it.

Preparations began in Australia in October 1918 as the flu started to appear in Europe. The government knew it was coming and they also knew they could not stop it, only try to prepare it and contain it.

Public direction orders were issued. Some of them are now very familiar from our own fight with COVID-19.

1919 was a different time, without the technology we take so much for granted today, but it was not a simpler time. People worried about paying their bills, about the family catching the disease, losing their jobs and also the heavy burden of coping with the aftermath of World War One.

Wartime shortages still existed and were accepted as part of everyday life. There was no brawling in supermarket aisles over toilet paper but then commercial toilet paper as we know it did not exist. There were also no supermarkets. You relied on the corner shop, the local butcher, the local fruit shop.

The public directions lists were quite comprehensive and included "Wash your hands." How many times do we hear that and also do it every single day? Carbolic was the favoured soap and there was even a certain brand recommended by the health authorities.

I'm not going to name it because I don't want it to be construed as an endorsement. I would not like to start a soap-buying frenzy during our own pandemic.

"Avoid coughing and sneezing or spitting," was the second direction.

Fines for spitting had been in place for 30 years but it was still an entrenched social problem and a super spreader of disease. The cough was one of the first symptoms in '19 and now we are once again coughing.

[She picks up a dark blue glass bottle]

[CHRYS]

This is a cough bottle.

In 1919, one of the main ingredients of many cough medicines was opium. Quite legal. But we don't have it in ours, thank goodness.

"All persons suffering from a cold in the head "must not enter a place of entertainment "or where people congregate."

Sounds very COVID-19 but that's 1919.

[Black and white photo of Hoyts Theatre Marrickville]

[CHRYS]

Theatres were closed for six weeks. They were reopened after protests, to give people a diversion and also to head off a complete economic collapse in that industry. All theatres had to comply with strict conditions when they reopened.

What we call social distancing meant empty seats between each patron, every second row was empty and there was a complete disinfecting after every session.

Our own iconic Enmore Theatre advertised a disinfectant was sprayed as a patron entered but not to worry, it was not harmful to the most delicate of fabrics and it smelt quite nice.

Hotels were also closed for weeks and when they did open, people had to line up outside, doing social distancing, and they were allowed in in small groups for five minutes, just long enough to drink or possibly swill your beer.

Unfortunately you couldn't go to a local bottle shop and stock up on supplies. You had to wait for the hotels to reopen. But some local hotels and theatres did not survive. They never reopened after the pandemic of 1919.

Churches were also closed for a while but reopened to give comfort and also to stem fear. Without churches being open, lay preachers and others took to street corners, prophesising that the end of days had arrived.

Another directive was "All persons suffering influenza must isolate," another very typical direction that we have today. Council health inspectors checked that isolation was being observed. They'd knock on the door to make sure you were OK.

Marrickville Council took out special life insurance policies for all their health inspectors.

Edward Brownell, the Chief Health Inspector, actually caught it and in a letter dated July 19, the council wrote to him in his own isolation. They said, "You've had a very trying time since February by devoting your time, day and night, to assist in fighting the epidemic now in our midst."

Brownell recovered and he was rewarded with a £10 gratuity which was about two weeks' pay at that time.

Now the next one, "a healthy lifestyle", is always being said today but the directions said, "Everybody should live a healthy lifestyle in every way. Keep your windows open day and night for ventilation. Allow the sun rays to freely enter the workroom, the bedroom, the lounge room."

Beaches were not closed in 1919 as the health authorities considered that the sea air was good for people. Locals did not have a lot of choice about which park they could go to for their healthy lifestyle.

[A sign at a local play ground: "Playground temporarily closed"]

[CHRYS]

Most of our playgrounds and parks that we see around the inner west today did not exist. Even large sports fields like Henson Park and Arlington Oval were still working brick pits.

And – this is a very important directive because we hear it on the TV all the time – "At the slightest symptom developing you must go to bed and isolate. Do not attempt to work your way through it. It could be fatal."

The advice is similar today. "Go test for COVID, even if you have those mildest of symptoms."

[A drive-through COVID Testing Centre]

[CHRYS]

So any cough or sneeze in 1919 was treated in the same way, similar. You were sent home to bed. Now you can go to a COVID testing clinic of which there are many around the inner west.

"You must also wear a mask outside at all times and it's recommended that you even wear it inside."

Fines were issued for anyone seen without a mask and if you were caught three times, you could be sent to prison.

Disinfection of nose and throat was highly recommended by inhalation and spray. Detailed directions on how to make your own were distributed. The main ingredients were eucalyptus, menthol and hydrogen peroxide.

[Chris picks up a clear bottle labelled "Eucalyptus Extract"]

[CHRYS]

It was also recommended that those recovering from pneumonic influenza could be dosed daily with some alcohol, like whisky, brandy and port were recommended.

The original Marrickville LGA is one I'm going to concentrate on today. It's our case study. What happened in that area is consistent with all our suburbs across the inner west.

Every day we have given an update on the COVID-19 numbers. We've all tuned in and seen that.

In 1919 numbers were also reported daily but not through TV, internet streaming or otherwise. They were listed in the daily newspapers.

In 2020, you can also go online to view the COVID map by postcode on the NSW Health website. Do check it. I check it regularly.

[A map of the Inner West showing ward divisions. It is covered with black pins and a few red pins]

[CHRYS]

Now, on the map that you see the black pins show a house, not a person. In 1919, households of up to ten people or more were quite common. As well as Mum, Dad and the kids, there could be grandparents, widowed siblings with their children, unmarried siblings or even lodgers.

Looking at the map, you can see how the influenza spread up and down the street and across the street. It was a frightening time, knowing that the virus was in your street or the next street and possibly only a matter of time before it was in your own home.

[Black and white photo of Marrickville District Hospital]

[CHRYS]

The red pins show a hospital, including Marrickville Cottage Hospital - and now I am sitting in the site of what was once Marrickville Cottage Hospital - Marrickville Emergency Field Hospital, which was in the grounds of Marrickville Public School.

[Black and white photo of Marrickville Hospital Ladies Ward]

[CHRYS]

And also, just outside our area, Lewisham Hospital and people were also taken to RPA and the Coast Hospital.

Lewisham Hospital was staffed mainly by the nuns of the Little Company of Mary. During the course of the pandemic, 50 nurses came down with the virus. Four died, four nursing nuns died of the disease. At Marrickville Cottage Hospital three nurses and a doctor also died of the disease. Like now, they were our frontline people. They had only 39 beds but across 1919 they treated 200 cases of flu as well as their usual problems. 56 people died in the Marrickville Cottage Hospital from pneumonic influenza.

The red also shows the inoculation or inhalations depot. Now stay tuned – more about them soon.

Marrickville Council's Infectious Disease Register, coupled with reports from newspapers, death certificates and death notices, record over 900 local cases and of those almost 300 people died in just the Marrickville area alone. These records' numbers may also be underestimation. The Infectious Disease Register includes 517 cases and of those, 202 died. That's a death rate of 39%. Across the inner west, the death toll was just under 800 people and there were at least 2,000 reported cases of influenza.

[Black and white photo of 4 nurses during the influenza epidemic, 1919, wearing full PPE hospital gowns and safety goggles. A man is wearing a face mask]

[CHRYIS]

Many people were nursed in their homes by volunteers. They were mainly young women in the age of 15 to 20 and a cohort of older women, who had been nurses, in their 70s.

[Black and white photo of the Leichhardt Red Cross nurses 1918-1922]

[CHRYIS]

Many of these women were in the Red Cross prior to the epidemic, during World War One, and went out to local to do other things. But they were also given a refresher course or even basic training at Marrickville Hospital.

Nurses returning from World War Two were again in the field fighting a new enemy. Three returning nurses from Petersham went to work at the Marrickville Emergency Field Hospital.

Schoolteachers from Marrickville Public School were seconded as nurses. The use of teachers, when their schools were converted, as nurses during the pandemic occurred right across the state. One minute you were teaching a class, next minute you were a nurse looking after the dead or the sick and the dying.

At Marrickville, a schoolteacher aged only 23 years died from the virus. Tragically, both her brothers were killed in World War One. Her parents would've been devastated. Their sons had died on foreign soil. Their only daughter died in her own neighbourhood in a battle just as deadly.

Health workers are rightly recognised as so important in our fight against COVID-19 and the same applied in 1919.

There is a group against which is often overlooked and they provide an essential service. I want to give a shout-out to chemists.

In 1919, chemists were often the first and sometimes only point of call when someone became ill.

Robert Brereton's pharmacy was in Marrickville Road. In 1919, Brereton provided medicines for those who could not afford it and personally went out to nurse the sick in their homes. He also worked here, Marrickville Cottage Hospital, and the Marrickville Emergency Hospital.

After his death in 1922, the residents of Marrickville raised £520, thousands and thousands of dollars, to establish a children's ward at Marrickville Hospital in his name for his tireless work in the community, particularly during the flu pandemic.

Where we're sitting is the old hospital and we're not that far from where the children's ward was so it's very appropriate that the children's area of the new Marrickville Library partly covers the site of Brereton's Ward.

Now what was an inoculation centre? I gave you a little bit of tantalising before.

We are waiting for a vaccine for COVID-19 but they did have one in 1919.

The Commonwealth Serum Laboratories were established during World War One. In 1919, they developed an experimental vaccine in anticipation of Spanish flu reaching Australia. Three million free doses were distributed throughout the country.

The Marrickville Inoculation Centre was in the old, the original, Marrickville Town Hall in Illawarra Road. During the height of the epidemic, 3,000 people were being inoculated every week and that was in March, April, 1919. About the same number were also being inoculated in Petersham, Leichhardt and Ashfield.

Did the vaccine work? Mm. Maybe. The best we can say is that maybe it did.

Clinical trials like we know it did not occur, could not simply be held.

So you've had your inoculation, you're washing your hands, you're isolating. What else could you do in 1919? Well, you should go to an inhalation centre.

Public inhalation centres were set up in local areas, private ones were in businesses for their own staff. The Marrickville Inhalation Centre was housed in the huge incinerator known as the Destructor.

[ Black and white photo of Marrickville Incinerator]

[CHRYS]

It was a walk-through chamber lined with machines dispensing eucalyptus and menthol mist. It was a giant mass nebuliser. The downside of these chambers was that if a person was actually infected - and they could transmit it when they breathed in and breathed out - they could infect the person in front of them, they could infect the person behind them, and often they didn't know.

But an insight in the effectiveness of the inhalation centre is given by a real estate agent from Marrickville Road. He wrote to council very early on in the pandemic, on the 21st February, 1919, saying, "I wish to congratulate the Mayor and Alderman on the excellent manner your council is trying to assist in keeping down the terrible plague in our midst. But of all your efforts, it's the installation of the inhalator which is of the greatest value. I daily take my dose and now I really enjoy it and I'm encouraging others to do it. I'm sure it's a good thing and beneficial."

Council workers that had been working on the incinerator counted people in and they also counted people out because there was one or two cases where people actually collapsed because they'd already been infected. So it was a new job for them.

The Marrickville inhalator in the Destructor closed at the end of June 1919 and reverted again to garbage disposal.

If you needed to travel anywhere interstate or to a regional area outside Sydney you had to present that you'd been in an inhalation centre and you also had to prove with your inoculation certificate that you'd been having your vaccine and then you might be given a medical clearance.

So who did catch it and when did they catch it and how did they catch it?

Like COVID-19, the disease usually did not affect children. Unlike COVID-19, it also did not usually affect older people. Its main targets were adults between the ages of 20 and 45 and the age group most affected were young adults between the ages of 21 and 30. They were not invincible to this disease.

Like COVID-19, many cases were mild. The worst cases, unfortunately, always ended in death.

The local pattern of infection in Marrickville is fairly consistent with other areas. In Marrickville the first cases appeared in early February. Five people were hospitalised. They were not returned soldiers but workers on a ferry that plied up and down the coast, delivering supplies. Four of them died.

And in March, 57 local cases arrived and then came the peak in April with over 300 cases. Nearly every street in Marrickville was affected by then. It dropped suddenly in May and people thought, "Oh, hallelujah, it's over." There was a big outpouring. "We've done it!" But it returned again in June and, in June, over 140 people were reported with pneumonic influenza.

But there is a bit of a debate about that. Did they actually have pneumonic flu or did they just have seasonal flu, because the winter of 1919 was bitterly cold.

There was a steep decline in July with less than 50 cases and none recorded as pneumonic influenza after that month.

The national declaration of pneumonic influenza as a notifiable infectious disease was revoked on the 13th August, 1919.

Services of thanksgiving were held in local churches, in Marrickville Town Hall and in theatres. There was such a church in the Enmore Theatre.

Unfortunately, secondary respiratory infection did occur in those who were most vulnerable, including returned servicemen and women.

I had a great-uncle who fought at Gallipoli, went to France. He came home with pneumonic influenza. He recovered as did the family that he infected. However, he died from complications in 1920. He was 23 years old. And that is a common pattern with returned people.

Antibiotics like penicillin were decades away.

[Black and white photo of a family with flags and a banner: "Welcome home, Petersham 1919]

[CHRYS]

The troops came home in December 1918. They began to arrive. And they came home in successive waves throughout 1919. The early returnees were met by the extended families, sometimes even by the whole street, with big, happy gatherings, with flags flying and banners on the roofs. And this type

of welcome home was unfortunately stopped by early March, as the authorities quite rightly thought they were worried about community transmission because of these large groups.

There was also a much darker welcome home for many soldiers.

We've seen it during COVID-19 with misguided, ignorant people attacking and spitting on our health workers in uniform, our police, transport workers and on our Australian-Asian citizens. The same happened with soldiers seen out and about in their uniforms or if they were known to have actually fought in the war. Accused of bringing the disease home, they were abused and spat on. This must have truly added to their difficulties of trying to adapt to their new civilian life. But they coped. And what lessons can we learn?

In 1919, people didn't have the comfort of mobile phones, television, internet, Netflix, fast-food deliveries, hand sanitiser and, of course, commercial toilet paper. They even had to make their own compulsory face masks.

Every day we see on our TV screens, our social media accounts like YouTube, Zoom conferences etc., of how people are coping with the lockdown - homeschooling, working from home plus all of those creative projects. We are seeing into their homes on a very personal level.

In the future, these glimpses of life in the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 will become an historical record.

If you haven't made a record of something that you have done during this outbreak, please do. The Inner West Council, through their history service, is collecting such records for the future. In 100 years' time, people may be sitting here saying, "And this is what happened in 2020."

So we cannot actually see what happened inside homes during the Spanish flu. We can't open a door and peek inside the 1919 home. We have to rely on written sources such as government, council and newspaper reports.

There are family stories passed down the generations which, even if they cannot be verified, should be treasured.

There are not, as you might expect, that many stories around. When it was over, people wanted to forget, to look ahead. I am going to attempt to give you a brief look if not through the front door of the house at least through the lens of community activity and historical record.

People did not go into lockdown that we've experienced. There was no working from home. You went out to work. Many jobs were lost in 1919 but it could not compare with the horror to come in the Great Depression.

In 1919, Marrickville was a powerhouse of industries such as woollen mills, steel companies, potteries, brickworks. These operated throughout the pandemic. Marrickville Council was the largest employer of local people and they were mainly roadwork labourers, garbage collectors and sanitary workers.

Marrickville Council spent over £700 buying disinfectant.

The median price of a house then was £200 so you can see it was a huge sum of money to be spent on disinfectant and their work was "Put them in the cart," because they were sprayed on streets.

These trucks were drawn not by motor vehicles but by horses, up and down our local streets. It took hours and hours every day to have this disinfectant sprayed around.

Homeschooling has been a feature of our lives for many weeks. Even those that don't have children at school have seen the difficulties of homeschooling. But spare a thought for the parents of 1919.

Schools were shut for eight long weeks and most parents could not homeschool as they neither had the expertise nor the resources.

Nearly every home, from an older terrace to a new Californian bungalow, had a vegetable garden and often chickens with eggs. In a way, 1919 were far more self-sufficient than we are.

Children would be given garden chores or told to hang out the washing but when that was over, they were sent out to the street to play. Also, the adults in a household didn't want children in the sick room. But growing up in the 1919 pandemic is another story.

In 2019, I gave several talks on the pneumonic influenza. It was a bit theatrical. I asked people to pretend that they had to keep a distance of 1.5 metres - yes, it was the same distance in 1919 that we're being asked to do today - hold out their hands and then move away from the person next to them. I even handed out face masks, hand sanitisers and we had a humidifier that had eucalyptus in

it. I wanted to give people a smell, a taste, of what a pandemic might be like, or so I thought. How wrong I was!

Now, however, after living through one, I have a much greater appreciation of the daily realities of a true pandemic.

I actually do not know how they did it in 1919. Loved ones came home and gave them the flu. They had lost loved ones in a devastating war. They also came home suffering from PTS, post-traumatic syndrome, which was not that understood.

Children were orphaned.

Mental health suffered then as it does now.

Domestic violence was a hidden crime. People did not talk about it. It was mainly left to family members to police other family members. There was no counselling service or educational programs. They just had to get on with it.

There was a date given as the official end of the pandemic but its effects lingered well into the next decade.

We are now experiencing a one-in-a-generation global pandemic. It has been 100 years coming our way. But during that 100 years we have come to expect that medical science can quickly come to our rescue. When a new virus arrives - swine flu, avian flu, SARS - the doctors we expect to be able to look after us. So I think it's come as a shock that there is no cure or even very limited treatment for COVID-19.

As in 1919, it's up to each of us to reach out and enter the fight.

I am rather ashamed to recall that I thought the main instruction in 1919 for people to wash their hands was a feeble one. I thought, that is the only advice they can give? Now I wash my hands and sanitise constantly.

People may not have been as shocked by the flu pandemic as we are when COVID-19 arrived.

Sickness was often seen as a normal part of their lives, not pleasant, not wanted, but always waiting there in the wings.

We can take comfort that the pandemic of 1919 did end and we can also learn from it.

The main difference between the pandemic of 1919 and 2020 is that our society has had a lot more available help and the combined global knowledge of a century to draw on.

Thank you and stay safe.

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