WAS IT LIKE SARS?



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New York City typist—at work on October 16, 1918—wears a mask during the time of Spanish Flu. Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

In 2003, another flu epidemic frightened the world's population—Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS as it has come to be known. That illness (a coronavirus which also seemed to quickly spread along transportation routes) strikes a person's lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

To try holding the virus in check, people (like those in Hong Kong and China) wore face masks, reminiscent of the time of Spanish Flu. And, because Spanish Influenza's most deadly complication was pneumonia, it has been likened to SARS. But the two diseases are not the same (although social distancing could help to contain their spread).

Spanish Influenza (unlike most other forms of flu) targeted young adults in the prime of their lives. And it stumped physicians who thought that medical science would be able to combat such epidemics. As Dr. Victor Vaughan observed, physicians of the day "knew no more about the flu than 14th century Florentines had known about the Black Death."

Although the cause remains unknown, Spanish Flu is believed to have started in China as a swine virus. (That is another reason people think that SARS is similar to Spanish Flu although, according to some reports, SARS originated with a civet cat in China.)

In America, the first cases of Spanish Flu originated with swine in Kansas. Young farmers, turned soldiers, carried the illness to military training posts and American troops brought it overseas.

To put the death toll in perspective, 9 million people died from World War I hostilities. Spanish flu killed more than 20 million people. (Recent scholarship puts the death toll even higher—to 50 million, or more.) The virus ... which caused all the trouble ... was so small it could not be cultured and remains mysterious today.

How did it get from pigs into humans? Where did the epidemic begin?

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WAS-IT-LIKE-SARS-Spanish-Flu-Pandemic

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WAS-IT-LIKE-SARS-Spanish-Flu-Pandemic

Questions 2 Ponder

What Limits Cures or Treatment for Virulent Diseases?

From the plague (during ancient times) to virulent forms of flu (during the 19th century) to Ebola (in the 21st century), cures or treatments of virulent diseases are limited by our understanding of the disease.

Technology is not always able to help us understand the illness, let-alone find a cure or treatment for it.

Have people in the 21st century come to believe that technology will help us solve everything? Explain your answer.

Is technology the source of all cures and treatments, for virulent disease? If not, why not?

What do we need, in addition to technology, to help us better understand disease and to develop cures or treatment protocols?

How Do Viruses Move from Animals to People?

Virulent diseases sometimes originate in birds or animals, then move to people where they can mutate and cause further difficulties.

In America, the first cases of Spanish Flu are believed to have originated with swine in Kansas. Nearly a century later, experts are still not certain how that happened.

There is a possible explanation, or a possible coincidence. People started getting sick at Ft. Riley soon after a significant wind storm carried the ashes of burning manure piles into the fort. Experts believe that the Spanish-flu virus was an airborne virus.

How do you think scientists should begin to investigate a new illness if all they have to go on is speculation about its cause?

How would scientists begin to understand a virus which could impact people differently than it impacts animals?

What answers could we get, for example, if a virus which originated in swine does not make the pigs ill but makes people deadly ill?

Media Stream



Spanish Flu - Mask-Wearing Typist
Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives. Record number 165-WW-269B-16.
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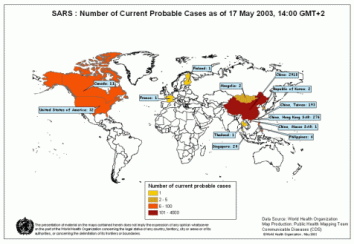

Cases of SARS - Outbreak During 2003
Graphic online, courtesy World Health Organization.
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Spanish Flu and Dr. Victor Vaughan
Quoted passages from "Influenza 1918," online courtesy PBS.
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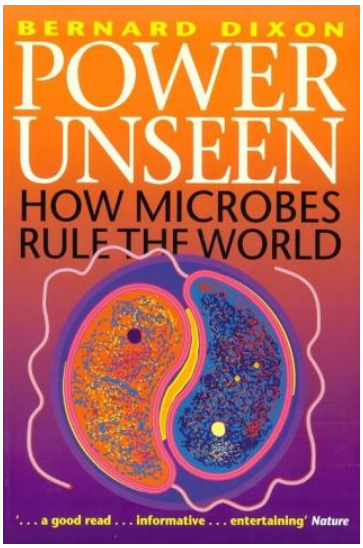

Power Unseen: How Microbes Rule the World

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SARS Virus - May Have Originated With a Civet Cat

Image online, courtesy the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
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