

Commentary by Parameswaran Hari

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (The more it changes, the more it's the same thing)

In 1918-1919, Major George A. Soper, a sanitation engineer from New York, wrote these eloquent and prescient articles on the Influenza pandemic for the journal Science. The submission published in October 1918 describes the epidemiology of Influenza spread in US Army camps (no aircraft carriers then). The following publication, from May 1919, is a very perceptive piece on the lessons of the pandemic. Major Soper by that time was already famous for tracking down and isolating Mary Mallon (unfairly described as Typhoid Mary to this day). Despite the intervening hundred years of medical progress, virologic study and genomic insight we can both feel for and identify with Soper - who wrote this at the peak of the great Influenza pandemic. If one substitutes "Covid 19" for "influenza", every sentence in the first two pages could apply just as well to what we are going through now. I found this to be refreshingly forthright and germane for us despite the lack of applicability of the some of the specific measures proposed. It is a timely reminder that human wisdom and experiences will transcend many challenges and remain relevant for a very long time.

References

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