The 1918 influenza epidemic

When the United States entered the First World War on April 6, 1917, the people of Galesburg were in a patriotic fervor with parades, community songs, and flag displays. As time passed, it became obvious some hard choices would have to be made. Hospitals in Knox County were drafted into the military leaving families unsupported and jobs unfilled. There were shortages of food and coal. The railroads were overstressed and the farmers faced many delays. The cost of living rose rapidly. Recurring campaigns to collect money for the Red Cross failed, yet many other good causes were frequent. It was a difficult time for everyone. Then the influenza pandemic began to spread around the world.

On September 25, 1918, Dr. C.S. Drake, the Director of the Illinois Department of Health, announced strict rules would be applied if it was necessary to quarantine any town or city in the state. The rules were meant to control the spread of influenza.

They included reporting all cases of the flu to local health authorities immediately. At funeral homes to be closed. Movies houses and other public gatherings were prohibited. Smallpox victims were isolated with cold symptoms. If the epidemic continued to spread, every citizen would be urged to stay at home.

During the 1918 pandemic, officials met with G.A. Lightle, a representative of the State Department of Health, on Sunday afternoon, September 29. In the midst of it all, Mayor Lightle described the dangerous character of the disease. It spread quickly from person to person. Anyone exposed to the flu contracted the disease within three days. The fever rose quickly to 103 degrees and continued up to five days. Recovery was quick when there were no complications.

The majority of deaths were due to secondary causes, mostly pneumonia. Individuals between the ages of twenty and forty were the most numerous victims. Pregnant women were most likely to die from the flu. Some individuals suffered a long period of weakness and depression afterward. Severe cases resulted in hemorrhages of the mucous membranes, especially the nose, stomach and intestines. Bleeding could also occur in the throat and skin. In some households, one person might have a mild case of flu. Another family member then being infected would have a serious case for days only.

Health authorities recommended the sick be kept isolated at home. All materials should be kept germ free. The sick room should be disinfected afterward. Spitting in public was forbidden with a $200 fine and imprisonment the result. In 1913, the Galesburg Woman’s Club had conducted a campaign to clean up the business districts. They talked to the businessmen to encourage them to remove trash from alleys and sidewalks. They asked the mayor and city council to hire a person to prevent spitting in the streets. (Spitting was a common habit among men and boys at that time.)

By October 5th, 148 flu cases had been reported in Galesburg. Dr. F.G. Hall, Galesburg City Health Commissioner, thought there might be as many as 300 cases in the city. Students at Galesburg College and, secondly, College of Business, were sick. Dr. Hall spoke to the Galesburg High School students and urged everyone to be careful. He advised students to put on rubber gloves to handle the mail and papers for an hour or two times a day. He also advised mothers to wear gauze over their mouths when entering the sick room.

Mrs. John Palmgren of 613 East Brooks Street was the first Galesburg resident to die of the flu. She had been sick for a week. There were six more deaths in the next 48 hours.

On October 11th Mayor Bradley issued a proclamation closing the public schools, colleges, churches, theaters and public meetings until further notice. The class on home nursing was allowed to continue. The Board of Education was closed on a new policy. The Red Cross shop that had been making bandages and garments for the soldiers in Europe was closed. It was allowed to sew masks for local use for a few days only.

By October 14th, the quarantine was expected to be in place for four to six weeks. It was conservatively estimated there were a thousand cases of flu in the city. The people of the city were cooperating with the quarantine which gratified health officials. There was a shortage of doctors and nurses. Volunteers were asked to help at the hospital to keep it operational.

October 16th the Evening Mail reported it had received notices of eighteen deaths before noon. October 20th was a “Chillless Sunday.” The city’s mayor declared a “Chillless Sunday” because a city councilman M.S. Campbell suggested a 3-minute sermon on the topic “The Certain Companionship,” which families could contemplate at home. They could be cutting their own hymnals and read passages from the Bible.

It was reported on October 22nd that Cottage Hospital had 104 patients. The capacity of the hospital was seventy. Thirteen of the students nurses were sick with the flu. Nearly a hundred workers at the Burlington Street Railway were sick. Thirty of the military cadets at Knox College had been treated at the hospital with only one death.

Seventy-six deaths occurred during the month of October, 1918. The epidemic began to wane in November. The churches were allowed to reopen on November 3rd and the colleges reopened on the 4th. The public schools reopened a week later. Children who had been sick could return to school. It was required to present a physician’s certificate that they were healthy.

During November the number of cases decreased. There were 62 deaths in November. There were 22 deaths during the month, which was a slight upsurge of cases in December, but not enough to require doubling the city again.

Influenza had spread on a line from Chicago to Springfield traveling west. Galesburg suffered more than Monmouth or other towns and villages in Knox County. In the State of Illinois there were 22,563 deaths among 350,000 influenza reporting. It was believed that only a quarter of the total cases had been reported. The final statistics showed two deaths for every 109 cases.

The influenza pandemic traveled around the world in about eighteen months from March 1918 to June 1920. It is estimated that 10% of the world’s population were infected. This is considered a pandemic in a country or region. World War I may have contributed to the flu pandemic by reducing military supplies, increasing the consumption of livestock and the intermingling of animals and humans in less developed parts of the world. These events increased knowledge about influenza available in today’s world. We can hope that it will save many lives.

This weekend was a historic one. A health care reform bill—H.R. 3962—was voted on in the Senate. It was passed. The Senate passed with a ‘pro-life amendment’ attached to it—proposed by one contestants for bill with medical care for all the uninsured, Bill was passed with a pro-life amendment. Senators Stupak (D-MI) which further limits a woman’s ability to get an abortion. The bill will be passed (after modifications) in the Senate, that it passed in the Senate because it is a very significant first step. Having watched the debate via my computer (on CNN’s online feed of CSPAN) you know, Saturday night, it became clear how partisan our political process has become. The bitterness and anger displayed by the speakers from both sides of the political divide serves as a vivid reminder that we have serious problems with our political system. We had better reform it before it leads to greater misunderstanding or much worse.

Several aspects of what happened on Saturday were really disturbing. First there was the rhetoric. Speakers pro and con of the bill offered very impassioned arguments yet everything was couched in terms of party affiliation. Next there was the vote, actually several votes, that ensued (for the amendments and the final bill). Lastly, there was the bill itself—full of compromises, obfuscation, and other shortcomings.

The problem, based on the debate, Republicans and Democrats, by definition, are worlds away from one another when it comes to reforming health care. Both sides were adamant that the other side is extremely misguided. But, reading between the lines, I think the Republican position makes one thing very clear. It looked more like a dog and pony show than a real ideological disagreement. The reality is simple. Based on what was said, there is no reason to think that either side of the bill is either being or both are nurturing their positions and the benefits in ways that are very different and, secondly, duplicative. Ultimately, both bills benefit the insurance and pharmaceutical industries very well. There has got to be a simpler, more honest, and more effective way to provide health care to all, a fundamental human right as far as I’m concerned. It doesn’t seem that our politicians want us to understand any more than we need to—hence, a 2,000 page bill and a very divisive situation.

The votes were extremely revealing. According to a CNN analysis, a vote by vote by vote by vote by vote by vote of 238 Democrats in the House: there are no complications at all. Of these Republicans all but one voted for the ‘pro-life’ amendment and against the final health care bill. Democrats were much more ‘flexible’ with 64 (or 25 percent) of them voting for the ‘pro-life’ Stupak amendment and 39 of them (or 15 percent) voting against the final bill. On the face of it, it would appear that Democrats are less ideological than Republicans. But, in the Senate, there were 48 other than party affiliation (or what their party leaders tell them to do) whereas the Republicans are the party with very narrow windows to think outside of a prescribed (some might say “dogmatic”) position.

A new development makes one look at the Democrats who voted with the Republicans. According to the pundits, most of them come from districts that voted for the Republican (other than Obama) for President in 2008. Thus, they were vulnerable and not willing to support Obama in his effort to reform health care. Once again we see that reelection appears to be much more important to our politicians than what might be “right” or “necessary.”

Now for the big question, entitled: “Affordable Health Care for America Act.” One Democrat, Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) voted against the bill because it doesn’t live up to its name. According to Congressman Kucinich, one of the few politicians that can be counted on to speak his mind (and not to be beholden to Big Pharma, Big Agribusiness, or Big Demo), the “bill that passed is really a major victory for the insurance companies who will now be guaranteed payments from over 90 percent of people. Apparently, if people can’t pay the bills then the government will subsidize them. If you haven’t heard much from the extremely well-endowed insurance companies it is precisely because this bill is a huge windfall for them. Perceptively, Congressman Kucinich asks, “Why is it we have to pay for health care at all? More health care, more money, less uninsured for money?” The inequities in our economy are piling up trillions for war, trillions for Wall Street and tens of billions for the investment companies. Banks and other corporations are sitting on piles of cash and are not willing to pay for health care at all. It makes zero sense, cutting away and denying health insurance to survive.” This question/statement must be asked and considered when one talks about any of the five systems. We must seriously consider a country that doesn’t provide health care to all its citizens and we also happen to be the country outsourcing nearly half of the world’s military budget as well (though we make up less than five percent of the world’s population).

The saddest part of the entire process is that the majority of Americans are not being listened to. To poll after poll, the majority of Americans want a nationalized health care system. They realize that Medicare is the best form of health care available right now and it is government run. The (mis)-framing of the issue of “single payer” indicates that the media doesn’t represent reality; they merely represent the interests of the advertisers (who pay their bills). Until we come to terms with this sad reality and make an effort to return the media to the people and make our politicians accountable for their neglect/misrepresentation of our will, we will continue to get “sold” to the lowest bidder (in this case, insurance companies which make billions of dollars in profits as we get sicker and sicker from degraded environments and processed foods).