

How Intentional Was the Naming of The 1918 “Spanish Flu”?

Angela Shultz

The world is facing a global pandemic as I write, and fingers are being pointed as to which country should be held responsible. But this isn't the first pandemic that the government has attempted to blame on another country. A century ago, another disease swept the globe and received the name the “Spanish Flu,” but it didn't originate in Spain. The “Spanish Flu” began in 1918 and killed upwards of 20 million people, though the exact number is still unknown. While the name hints strongly towards the flu originating in Spain, there has been much research that disagrees with what the name suggests. So, what was the real reason for naming the disease after Spain and how intentional was it? Some experts opine that there was an intentional motive behind naming the pandemic influenza after Spain because the name of a disease plays a large role in how the public and authorities will react. However, there are researchers who feel that there was simply misinformation when the flu was named as it occurred during World War I.

Researchers are still debating the origin of the 1918 Flu. But even though there is controversy as to where it actually began, they do agree on one thing: it did not begin in Spain. According to James F. Armstrong, the first known case reported was in Haskell, Kansas, on March 11, 1918, at a military camp, Camp Funston. Word

came in soon after the report. Of other military bases that had soldiers carrying the infection and before long, all the other states had reported sickness as well (Armstrong).

In another study, Edwin Oakes Jordan, a bacteriologist and public health scientist, writes of three other possible sites besides Haskell, Kansas, where the flu could possibly have begun: China or France and Great Britain in British military camps. But as Jordan was looking at a report written in March 1918, he started to wonder if his findings pointed strongly towards Haskell, Kansas, as the origin. The report stated that there had been several deaths from pneumonia, but strangely enough, these deaths were dated to when the first wave of influenza began. Jordan's idea was that new recruits may have passed the infection to other military camps in America and overseas. But he was not able to find strong enough information or evidence that would have specifically identified Haskell, Kansas, as the origin (qtd. in Humphries). This simply confirms a quote by Jordan in one of his studies, “[I]ts origin is largely shrouded in obscurity” (qtted. In Humphries). So, while there have been multiple theories as to where the epidemic began, it's still unclear as to where it really originated. The conclusion is quite simple though: it did not begin in Spain as its name suggests. These sources provide background information for the answer to

my research question.

So, while it is plain that the flu did not originally begin in Spain, the reason behind naming it after the country is not so clear. Some researchers feel that there wasn't a purposeful or sinister motive behind it, as Michaela E. Nickol and Jason Kindrachuk suggest in an article. Instead, Nickol's and Kindrachuk's idea is based on circumstances in 1918. The Spanish flu and World War I occurred during the same time frame. Because Spain was the one of the few neutral countries during the war, newspapers in said country were able to report about the influenza effects. Researchers are unsure as to why newspapers in Spain were at more liberty to report on the flu. But as a result, the 1918 flu became mistakenly named after the country, the "Spanish Flu" (Nickol and Kindrachuk). This was not the only reason for the disease to be named after Spain, but it may have played a small part.

Maite Zubiaurre brings her own interesting perspective to bear on this issue. She talks again about the fact that while there was more extensive media coverage of the influenza in Spain, feelings of distaste which stemmed from cultural prejudice, were also being directed against the Spaniards at that time. Because of this, it could be argued that it was an intentional and convenient step in which other countries could easily hand the blame over to a neutral, but slightly-disliked country.

There is not only one theory that suggests the "Spanish Flu" was unintentionally named after a country it did not even originate from. James F. Armstrong had a slightly different idea though. As Spain was not active in the current war and the disease was being transported mainly through the military, it made headlines when Spain's king, King Alfonso, became sick (Armstrong). Armstrong believes that this news is how it became named the "Spanish Flu." Because of this interest drawn towards

Spain, it is a possibility that it was simply an easy way to name an unnamed global pandemic and call it after a country that made headlines. While this theory by Armstrong is somewhat improbable, it provides a better understanding and basis in which to build off of another logical theory.

What seems to be a more plausible answer to the question, based on historical research, lies within Trevor Hoppe's article "Spanish Flu": When Infectious Disease Names Blur Origins and Stigmatize Those Infected." He promotes the notion that names are a determining factor in how the public and authorities will react to the disease. The previous research proved that the 1918 flu, in fact, did not come from Spain. Hence, Hoppe addresses the reason as to why it and other diseases are oftentimes labelled with foreign names. The 1918 Flu was called the "Spanish Flu," COVID19 has been referred to as the "Chinese Virus," and the flu in 2009 was dubbed the "Mexican Swine Flu." Some diseases are given names based on how scientists think they are transported or where they began. But most often, scientists give names based on where they believe a disease may have started, even if it's not accurate. Scholars say that a feeling of safety is established by new sicknesses being given names to associate foreign populations and the spread of diseases, whether done intentionally or not (Hoppe). The theories mentioned previously don't necessarily disagree with each other, but instead tie together to give a fuller explanation as to how the "Spanish Flu" got its name.

There are unfortunate consequences for populations who receive the name of a new disease. Charles J. Van Hook, a pulmonologist, said in the *Emerging Infectious Disease* journal, "The Navajo people reacted strongly against any further association with the disease that had led to so much initial prejudice, and tribal elders appealed to officials to reconsider" (qtd. in Irfan).

This quote refers to a new disease that was found in 1993 near the Navajo Nation Territory, which then became named after the area. The Navajos became further looked down upon with the sickness associated with them. This reinforces the point of how detrimental the naming of a disease after foreign or minority populations can be to them. Stanley Perlman, professor of microbiology, hits the nail on the head in his quote, “The people who live there are being unfairly associated with a virus. It’s not their fault” (qtd. in Gordan). It isn’t fair to ethnic minorities to purposefully tie them to a disease by naming it after them. And it is painfully obvious that it is less powerful countries who are being intentionally associated with new viruses. There are no diseases overtly named after America that can be found in history. And though we could make the argument that it is simply because there haven’t been any spreadable diseases originating from these countries (Gordan), that doesn’t hold true as there has been much evidence, though it is still being debated, pointing to Haskell, Kansas, as the origin of the 1918 Flu.

But it isn’t just about the name of an epidemic that occurred a century ago. Our current day and age is still struggling with this as well. As noted before, COVID 19 has been referred to by certain well-known politicians as many different things, such as the “Chinese Virus,” “Wuhan Coronavirus,” “China Virus,” and other pointed names. This again shows that, whether or not it’s intentional, associating the current epidemic with a foreign country promotes feelings of safety and alleviates feelings of blame. Like Carol Goldin, a Rutgers University researcher, said, “...one consequence of such identification is that it allows the rest of society to simultaneously assign blame, and through contrast, define their own innocence...” (qtd. in Irfan). By detaching ourselves from an epidemic such as COVID19,

we give up any responsibility and place the by on China.

It appears though that lessons are being learned and guidelines are being put into place for the naming of epidemics. Dr. Patel is quoted as saying, Here’s the thing, we live in a different time now, and people can say all they want, “Hey, in the past they’ve named these viruses after geographic locations [sic].” What we will say back to them is yes, but with outbreaks in this world we see associated racism, and we see associated prejudice, so why don’t we learn from the past, and why don’t we set a new standard and get everyone on board with a more scientific process, and that’s [sic] actually calling the virus by its actual scientific name, SARS-Cov2 and calling the disease COVID-19. (qtd. in Miguel)

So, while we have seen attempts to associate the new epidemic with China by giving it the name of “Chinese Flu,” it appears that the government and the majority of people are slowly counteracting what had once been the common practice, during the 1918 flu and other past epidemics, of naming diseases after foreigners.

While other factors, such as the reporting of the flu in Spain, could have played a part in the naming of the “Spanish Flu,” other intentional motives weigh in even more heavily. Just as a country was unfairly linked to a pandemic during 1918, even now, China is being bullied with names that point to them as the origin. It is essential that diseases no longer be named with the purpose of manipulating the public or placing blame, as ethnic targeting is often a result. More research is needed to understand the complete consequences of naming a new disease after a foreign population. Researching past pandemics, such as the 1918 flu, will play a large role in doing so.

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