

Epidemics and Pandemics Through the Centuries: A Historical Perspective

M. John Hicks, MD, DDS, MS. PhD, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX

Objectives:

Following attendance of this symposium presentation, the participant should be able to:

1. Define the term epidemic;
2. Define the term pandemic; and
3. Contrast and compare the 1918 Influenza Pandemic with the current SARS-Cov2 Pandemic.

Over the past centuries, numerous epidemics and pandemics have occurred in isolated countries, as well as throughout the entire globe. The approach to limiting epidemics and pandemics has been quite variable. Isolation of infected individuals and identification of the possible etiologic agent have been paramount to cessation of the infectious process. Depending upon individual locales and countries and means of dealing with an epidemic or pandemic, outcomes are remarkably different with respect to proportion of the population experiencing the infection and overall number of deaths. In fact, epidemics and pandemics have resulted in disruption of the economic stability of affected countries, changing the course of history, and heralding the possible end of a civilization. Although the current SARS-Cov2 pandemic may be perceived by the current world's countries and their citizens as a unique event, history has shown that epidemics and pandemics have existed since prehistoric times, utilizing archeological anthropological methods. The first well-documented epidemic occurred in prehistoric China some 5,000 years ago (3,000 B.C), which ravaged the population in a region of China. Perhaps, the most recognized pandemic is the 1918 Influenza Pandemic which resulted in millions of deaths worldwide and introduced the novel use of plasma therapy. With the advent of remarkable effective immunization programs, epidemics and pandemics have largely been prevented or avoided, until the current SARS-Cov2 pandemic. Many of the lessons learned from investigation of prior epidemics and pandemics are important in applying to current and future epidemics and pandemics.