

## Winter viruses

Connie Nugent MLS

*I had a little bird  
Its name was Enza.  
I opened up the window  
And in-flew-enza.<sup>1</sup>*

**A** report in this issue of the *Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* discusses the rates of cases of COVID-19 and influenza in Texas. While more COVID-19 infections than influenza cases have occurred, the cases of influenza have resulted in more deaths.<sup>2</sup> As cold and flu season approaches, physicians urge the public to take advantage of the vaccines offered for the new variant of COVID-19, for influenza, and for respiratory syncytial virus (RSV).

While the COVID pandemic killed millions worldwide, the rapidly developed vaccines likely saved millions of lives. In recognition, the 2023 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine was awarded to Drs. Katalin Kariko and Drew Weissman “for their discoveries concerning nucleoside base modifications that enabled the development of effective mRNA vaccines against COVID-19...the laureates contributed to the unprecedented rate of vaccine development during one of the greatest threats to human health in modern times.”<sup>3</sup>

The influenza pandemic in the early twentieth century had no specific preventive vaccine, and from February 1918 to December 1920, one-third of the global population—500 million people—were infected. One hundred million people died, many more than the soldiers and civilians killed during World War I.

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**DOI:** 10.12746/swrccc.v11i49.1241



Edvard Munch (1863–1944). *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu*. 1919.

National Gallery, Oslo. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed 9-20-2023.

Artists recorded the misery, focusing even on their own illness.<sup>4</sup> Edvard Munch’s self-portrait in 1919 depicts the artist in nightclothes slumping in a wicker chair, the rumpled sheets and blankets of his sickbed behind him to the left. The viewer’s eye is caught by the opulent colors in the room and how they contrast with the artist’s pale complexion; his unshaven cheeks seem drawn in as his open mouth breathes in gasps.

Munch painted another self-portrait after he survived his infection. Although he is no longer confined to his bed or to a chair and is dressed in a suit, he



Edvard Munch (1863–1944). *Self-portrait after the Spanish Flu*. 1919–1920. National Gallery, Oslo. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed 9-20-2023.

His face is haggard, his gaze is unfocused, his eyes are puffy, and he looks exhausted from the ravages of influenza.

Without a preventive vaccine for influenza in 1918–1920, many people relied for relief on traditional nostrums—family “remedies”—or were victims of outright quackery. The English word *quack* derives from the Dutch *kwakzalver*, a charlatan who peddles ineffective, sometimes dangerous, medicines. The quack’s loud attention-getting yammering at crowds recalls the noisy quacking of ducks and geese, hence the label “quack.”<sup>5</sup> Quackery was evident during the influenza pandemic, as illustrated in this 1919 political cartoon by Chas Reese.<sup>6</sup> A large banner hangs over a wooden building that announces, “Ye Olde and Goode Germ Destroyer. Distilled and bottled for ye kindly gentlemen.” (One wonders why 50% of the population was left out.) Crowds of men in suits rush into the building to grab this wonder drug, even climbing through windows. Hats and shoes are lost in the melee. Latecomers are shown in the background quickly driving on a winding road to the germicide station. Looming over

nevertheless does not look robust. His frame no longer looks emaciated, but he still slumps while standing.



Reese, Chas. *Influenza: rush on a germicide station during the scare*. 1919. National Library of Medicine. Images from the History of Medicine Collection. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101456124-img>. Accessed 9-20-2023.

the entire landscape is an ominous black cloud labeled “Influenza.”

Quackery existed during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. Panicked about the rapid spread of the virus, many people self-medicated by consulting friends, neighbors, and social media for ways to treat or prevent this illness. Some were convinced, for example, that chloroquine and its variant hydroxychloroquine would do the trick. After all, President Donald Trump even advocated for its use, against the recommendation of his medical advisors.<sup>5,6</sup> After an Arizona couple ingested a form of chloroquine—he died, and she was hospitalized—, Dr. Daniel Brooks, director of the Banner Poison and Drug Information Center, commented, “...self-medicating is not the way... The last thing we want to do is inundate our emergency departments with patients who believe they found a vague and risky solution that could potentially jeopardize their health.”<sup>6</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Food and Drug Administration issued dozens of warning letters to “companies making false claims for products that ‘cure’ or ‘protect’ against the coronavirus. These products ranged from essential oils and supplements to home diagnostic kits.”<sup>5</sup>

*Winter is icummen in  
Llude sing Goddamn.  
Raineth drop and staineth slop  
And how the wind doth ramm!*<sup>7</sup>

Vaccines have been developed that are effective against most variants of the coronavirus and for influenza and RSV. The winter season brings widespread exposure to these viruses, so prudent people should take advantage of the protection these vaccines offer. Dr. Peter Katona and colleagues are concerned that “willful ignorance and misinformation” about vaccines contribute to pervasive illness and advise, “Just get the damn shot.”<sup>8</sup>

**Keywords:** COVID-19, influenza, RSV, coronavirus, vaccines

**Article citation:** Nugent C. Winter Viruses. *The Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* 2023;11(49):56–58

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**Submitted:** 10/1/2023

**Accepted:** 10/5/2023

**Conflicts of interest:** none

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