

SARS and beyond – is Middle Georgia safe from the next outbreak?

By Rick Maier

West Nile, bio-terrorism, cruise ship sickness. Every few months we have a major new health threat. It's easy to get complacent because the risks seem so remote to us in Middle Georgia.

And so it seems to be with the latest SARS outbreak. While it looks like we dodged another bullet, the similarities of SARS to the 1918 influenza pandemic are frightening and should spur us to learn some lessons from that deadliest period in history.

In 1918, 31,000 Georgians died of influenza. More Americans died of the flu that year than from all the wars since 1900. The 1918 disaster was not the first or last of these pandemics - 70,000 Americans died in 1957-58 from Asian flu and 34,000 died in 1968-69 from Hong Kong flu. In 1976, 40 million Americans were vaccinated during the Swine flu scare.

Why do Americans know so little about the 1918 disaster? Apparently we humans are wired to collectively block out horrific events. The forgetting begins as soon as the dying ends.

Our knowledge of viruses has come a long way, but experts still don't understand how the 1918 flu killed 21 million people around the world. Which of course means that it could happen again.

Troop movements and civilian parades following the end of World War I certainly amplified the deadliness of the 1918 outbreak. However, they didn't have widespread global jet travel to deal with back then.

There were no vaccines for influenza in 1918, but today we still only treat known types of influenza. In the months or years it can take to develop a shot for a new strain, the virus can mutate, making the vaccine ineffective. For a particle too small to be considered a life form, the tiny influenza viruses seem very clever in their drive for destruction.

Experts think that the 1918 virus started with soldiers burning manure in Kansas. More often humans get new forms of influenza from animals, especially pigs (swine flu). Outbreaks often originate in Asia because of farming practices (pigs raised near chickens, fewer animal inoculations) and more crowded conditions.

The biggest challenge is knowing how to react. We saw China bungle their response to the SARS outbreak. Canada was not very decisive either. Will the United States close airports and roads in time? Would we be willing to profile certain nationalities or quarantine people against their will?

How should the press react - minimize panic or prepare us for the worst? Back in the fall of 1918 when as many as 166 people reported getting the flu in a single day, the Macon Daily Telegraph offered headlines such as “flu epidemic on the wane,” “rapidly approaching crest” and “cases still on decline.”

How will we react individually to the next outbreak? Will we blow it off or bunker down? Just look at how differently we each reacted to Y2K a few years ago.

I figure the two biggest uncontrollable threats to my family’s safety are stupid drivers and some kind of pandemic. While my government spends its time sweating smaller issues, I try, without alarming the kids, to look out for that tip of the iceberg that floats out there appearing like a simple chunk of ice.

We don’t need to panic, but we must stay vigilant. Study influenza – the CDC and NIH websites are particularly good. Practice good hygiene. And let’s all hope that scientists defeat SARS and pioneer new ways to control the next outbreak.

Rick Maier has written a new novel “Bone Dust” about a fictional outbreak of influenza in Macon. See www.rickmaier.com.