

A Century of Progress?

By Philip A. Baer, MDCM, FRCPC, FACR

"History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

– Quote attributed to Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain)

The pandemic we are all tired of continues to fatigue us physically and mentally. Numbers spew out hourly from the information firehose: cases, hospitalizations, intensive care unit (ICU) admissions, deaths, percent vaccinated, testing backlog, and more. Each number comes with many flavours: municipal, public-health unit level, provincial, national, and international. Even within the span of reasonable debate, one can find incredibly diverse and conflicting sets of views covering essentially all possibilities: we are doing too much or too little; we are acting too late or prematurely; we should or should not follow the example of some other place "X".

So, what can one do? Minimize exposure to conventional media, such as television, radio, and newspapers, to start. Of course, social media is flooded with memes, GIFs, and posts, so turn that off as well. Good luck trying to stop family, friends, and colleagues from discussing the number one concern of the day.

Perhaps a more promising escape is to history and to fiction. Pandemics are richly represented in movies and books. Modern takes such as "Contagion," "28 Days Later," "Outbreak," "I am Legend," "The Hot Zone," and the Canadian film "Pontypool" may be too closely linked to current events to provide relief. A classic like "The Plague" might be better.

I found what I was looking for in "The Pull of the Stars" by Emma Donoghue, who now lives in London, Ontario. In 2018, she decided to write a book centred on the events of the "Spanish flu" pandemic of 1918, and its particular impact on pregnant women and those caring for them at a hospital in Dublin. My wife volunteered us to moderate a discussion on the book at our local book club, populated by many retired English teachers and professors, so we had to parse the manuscript much more carefully than those reading casually.

In doing so, striking parallels emerge with our current situation. Progress in technology and in science has been dramatic in the last century, but human behaviour and our reaction to crisis is not that different. Viruses were unknown in 1918, so theories abounded as to the cause of the pandemic, including World War One and various toxins. Spain was open in its reporting of the pandemic, hence the "Spanish flu" name, though it apparently originated in the U.S. This time around, we had initial names like "Wuhan flu" and equally speculative origin stories involving lab experiments gone wrong, wet markets, human

incursions into the wilderness, and others. Blaming South Africa for Omicron rather than lauding scientists there for identifying this variant is another example.

Crisis as opportunity is another theme common to both eras. In the book, doctors are in short supply, giving nurses and midwives more agency than they would normally have been allowed to exercise. Similarly, we currently have leveraged the expertise of pharmacists to deliver vaccines far more than they usually do, and we have created teams to extend the reach of our small cadre of ICU and infectious disease physicians to deliver care to all who require it.

Other similarities abound: "Health care heroes" is a familiar label currently, often applied by our leaders to those who pre-pandemic were toiling away in difficult and precarious jobs for low pay, but whose value has belatedly been realized. Similarly, the novel highlights the efforts of those toiling with little recognition in the pandemic trenches: volunteers, junior nurses, midwives, and orderlies.

Equity issues have been highlighted in our current pandemic, with marginalized and racialized workers who must work in congregate settings at the highest risk of infection. A century ago, food insecurity and poverty were rampant, and outcomes were equally skewed.

"Patient first, hospital next, self last" is a quotation from the novel which resonated with me. That is definitely a recipe for burnout, and unsustainable beyond the initial response to a pandemic or any other crisis.

Gender bias in 1918 was not surprising. The book features male orderlies lording it over better trained female nurses, and male doctors of any specialty exercising clinical authority over trained midwives. Today, we still have an embedded gender pay gap in medicine in Canada, and a recent profile on the fate of the first female head of cardiac surgery at McMaster shows we have not come as far as we thought.¹

Masking controversies and unconventional remedies (onions and garlic vs. ivermectin) are well-represented as well in both eras.

Finally, my research for this article revealed that Edvard Munch was a survivor of the Spanish flu and painted a self-portrait at the time. No, it was not "The Scream," which was painted in 1893, but rather "Self Portrait with the Spanish Flu," painted in 1919, and viewable

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at the link referenced below.² If that intrigues you, you can learn more about using art to manage the stress of medical practice in the final reference below, featuring a program pioneered at Harvard and now offered in Canada by the Art Gallery of Ontario.³

Do whatever works for you and stay safe.

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References:

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2. "Self Portrait with the Spanish Flu." *Metmuseum.org*. Available at www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/668328. Accessed March 8, 2022.
3. Francine Kopun "For physicians stressed out from COVID-19, a brush with fine art might be just what the doctor ordered?" Toronto Star. December 28, 2021. Available at www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/12/28/for-physicians-stressed-out-from-covid-19-a-brush-with-fine-art-might-be-just-what-the-doctor-ordered.html. Accessed March 8, 2022.

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Welcome to the following new CRA members:

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