

The Influenza Pandemic in Japan, 1918 1920 : The First World War between Humankind and a Virus

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EPILOGUE

This is the first time I have attempted to write about the history of an event. The Spanish influenza pandemic was dreadful, indeed, taking several hundreds of thousands of lives in Japan alone. Historical demography, which is my specialty, ends up dealing quite a bit with death and when I am dealing with statistics on deaths, I feel quite dispassionate. But when one becomes involved with the stories of such an event, in which hundreds of thousands of people suffered and died, it is hard not to get more emotionally involved than is usual in demographic research. Statistical data shows numbers of deaths, but in reality death results in people parting from their loved ones, family, and friends forever. Especially when the cause of death was influenza, which spread great suffering and death without the cause being known, one can only imagine how those who died cursed their luck and how bereft were those left behind. No doubt it left an indelible mark in people's memories, and yet the calamity may have been one they wished to forget as soon as possible. Thinking of people huddled feverishly in their beds as the virus attacked them, the helplessness of their caregivers, of the bodies piled up at crematoriums, or the mourners at one funeral after another was often a little too much for me; each time I had to try to put a lid on my feelings just to continue with my writing.

Today people and the media have been talking about the threat of the “new avian influenza” virus. As of the end of February 2005—when I was in the process of writing the original book on which the present English version is based—the new virus fortunately remained at the level of a virus that can be transmitted from birds to humans. We do not know when it will mutate so that it would be transmitted from humans to humans; when that happens, this being the era of international air travel, there is the danger that the virus may spread very quickly worldwide. Experts warn that the surface-covering protein of the avian influenza virus may have been transformed so that it might more easily penetrate human cells. Many say it is almost certain that, if a deadly virus humankind has never experienced before began to spread, mortality could be extraordinarily high. In issuing such warnings, they almost always refer to the 1918–1920 influenza. For people living around 1918, influenza was a new form of pandemic of the kind that could be threatening us right now.

Humankind and viruses will probably continue fighting as long as both exist. Influenza pandemics occurred a number of times in the past, but I would call the 1918–1920 influenza pandemic the “first world war between humans and viruses.” That is partly because the pandemic was closely connected with World War I and partly because it spread throughout the world, killing somewhere between 25 and 45 million people.

There were influenza pandemics before that, like the one that raged on a worldwide scale in the 1890s, but we do not know anything specific about them. The 1918–1920 pandemic is the first case for which we have a fairly large amount of data and documents and for which the number of deaths from the disease can be estimated, although the estimates do vary widely.

Meanwhile, even if we have knowledge about the influenza pandemic, we cannot directly apply that knowledge and come up with effective measures to prevent a new strain of influenza virus today. Of course, we should take all possible measures in preparation for the onslaught of new virus strains and large numbers of patients. But, it seems impossible to prevent the spread of such viruses, as I have noted frequently in these pages. An influenza pandemic is a form of natural disaster; we cannot prevent it. All we can hope to do is to mitigate damage as much as possible.

This book is not designed to assist preparedness against new influenza strains from the standpoint of medicine or public hygiene. Virology has been making such rapid progress that medical scientists have little time to look back and dwell on the early twentieth-century influenza pandemic. I simply depict the pandemic as a historical event, listening to the cries of those who were inflicted with the virus and conveying to the generations of today and the future, how people in those days dealt with the situation, what measures the government took, and why the pandemic was forgotten. It is dedicated to the fervent hope that humankind will have the wits to learn from bitter past experience as we face the perils and uncertainties before us.