

STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES:

Pandemic a century ago

As we are in the midst of what may later be termed the “COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020”, we have the opportunity to think about the “Spanish flu pandemic”^{*} that attacked the world a little more than a century ago.

Twenty per cent of the world’s population was struck by this virus in 1918 and 1919. More than 50 million people died after becoming infected, a figure that gives pause when compared to the 16 million that perished during the four years of World War I.

The influenza reached Australia in early 1919. About 40 per cent of the population fell ill and around 15,000 died as the virus spread through Australia.

At PLC Sydney the academic year did not start until 3 March 1919. We know this from a single sentence in the “Record Book”: “Owing to Influenza Epidemic and Government restrictions resulting therefrom school was not resumed till March 3rd.”¹

The severity of the situation speaks for itself, and yet issues of the *Aurora Australis* from that time reveal little about life at the College. The most telling entry from the June 1919 issue of the school magazine records:

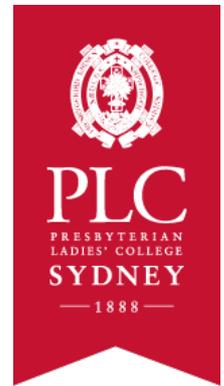
“Such a dislocated half-year this has been, the customary four terms having been re-arranged into three of longer duration. Since the majority of the literary contributions to the *Aurora* begin with ‘Owing to Influenza’, further explanation is unnecessary.”²

Indeed, later pages report that no tennis, hockey, baseball or basketball competition matches were played in the first half of the year.

Humour in times of adversity is always “good medicine” and a nameless contributor submitted one of the only five literary pieces in that issue, a poem titled “Precautions Owing to ‘Flu’”:

¹ Record Book 1917-1957, p. 8.

² *Aurora Australis* June 1919, p. 7.



Precautions Owing to 'Flu.

The antiseptic Enid and the prophylactic Mif,
Were playing in the garden when the puppy gambolled up,
They looked upon the creature with a loathing undisguised,
For it wasn't disinfected and it wasn't sterilized.
They said it was a microbe and a hot-bed of disease.
They steamed it in a vapour of a thousand odd degrees;
They froze it in a freezer that was cold as banished hope,
And washed it in permanganate with carbolated soap.
In sulphuretted hydrogen they steeped his wiggly ears,
And trimmed his frisky whiskers with a pair of hard-boiled shears,
They sped him out of science at a 'lectrifying rate
To the inhalatorium to smell the zinc-sulphate.
They donned their rubber mittens and took him by the hand,
And 'lected him a member of the fumigated band.
There's not a micrococcus in the garden where they play,
They breathe in pure iodoform a dozen times a day,
And each imbibes its rations from a hygienic cup,
Enid and Mifanwy, and the prophylactic pup.

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Returning to our current situation in 2020, as we disinfect, sterilise, steam, wash and fumigate, let's also remember kindness, patience and empathy!

*The 1918-1919 influenza pandemic is often called the "Spanish flu", not because it originated in Spain, but due to it first being widely reported there.

Sources:

National Museum of Australia

PLC Sydney Archives

Debby Cramer, Archivist

³ *Aurora Australis* June 1919, p. 19.