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## Perspectives

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## Pandemic

[Mark Honigsbaum](#) <sup>a</sup>

Even before the panic over influenza A H1N1 (swine flu) hit the headlines, pandemics were becoming unavoidable in popular culture as both an ever-present threat and a metaphor for collective hysteria. But this was not always the case. In the first recorded use, in 1666, the English physician Gideon Harvey used “Pandemick” interchangeably with “Epidemick” to mean a malignant disease that “do generally...haunt a Country”. Interestingly, although Harvey was writing just a year after the Great Plague, the reference came in a tract about consumption. For Harvey and his contemporary Samuel Pepys, the plague was merely a “pestilence”.

Pandemic comes from the Greek *pan* meaning “all” and *demos* “the people”, and is commonly taken to refer to a widespread epidemic of contagious disease throughout the whole of a country or one or more continents at the same time. In the case of influenza, biologists also require that pandemic strains undergo key genomic mutations, known as antigenic shift. For WHO to sound a level six pandemic alert there has to be sustained transmission in at least two regions at the same time.

The Ur-pandemic of modern times was the 1918–19 “Spanish” influenza, which is estimated to have killed some 50 million people worldwide. But more interesting from the point of view of current use was the Russian influenza of 1889–93. Coinciding with the late Victorian boom in newspapers and the growth of the telegraphic network, the “Russian” influenza was chronicled by the press, with the consequence that the virtual “dread” of its depredations reached Paris, London, and New York well in advance of the actual sickness. The result was that whereas before 1890 *The Times* had used “pandemic” just twice, after 1890 it became linked to the speed of global communications and other tropes of modernity. A pandemic was no longer simply an epidemic affecting “all” the people, it had become a global media event.


The final ingredient came in 1981 with the advent of HIV/AIDS; the initial response in many countries certainly seemed to put the “panic” back into pandemic. But it is the spectre of avian influenza and now influenza A H1N1 that has made the term ubiquitous. The result, unfortunately, is widespread cynicism. Whereas once people took the notion of a pandemic seriously, overuse has turned the term into a pseudonym for an overhyped event. We can only hope that H1N1 will turn out to be an example of the latter.


<sup>a</sup> Wellcome Trust Centre for History of Medicine at UCL


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