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FACE MASKS FOR THE PUBLIC DURING COVID-19

Face masks for the public during covid-19: the more things change

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On 1 November 1918, *Stars and Stripes* (the official newspaper of the American Expeditionary Forces) proudly announced: “Gauze masks for men on transport keep flu at bay.”¹ Some 5000 men crossed the North Atlantic Ocean wearing masks fashioned from squares of gauze “saturated with a 1% solution of iodine” and fastened with strips of adhesive. There were “no missing men when the rolls were called.” They announced that the backbone of the epidemic was “broken” among army ranks. Their celebrations were premature; more enlisted men were yet to die from influenza than from enemy fire.²

But this view of masks during the 1917 influenza pandemic was not unanimous. Leading psychiatrist and neurologist, James Crichton-Browne, interviewed in the *Observer*, was sceptical. “The fact that the influenza organism is so infinitely minute that it can make its way through porcelain throws doubt on the value of the mask. Its use in the streets with the addition of goggles as has been proposed would, I believe, be futile, and would probably, if resorted to on a large scale, produce panic, which has always contributed to the spread of epidemic disease.”³

As we bicker today over whether masks should be worn to prevent covid-19,⁴ we can see that this is a longstanding debate. Longstanding as well are the points at which these two historical perspectives converge. Crichton-Browne highlighted the “avoidance of places of public assembly,” while the army doubled the allotted space per man in tents and ocean transport in order to provide “more room to move.” Both emphasised control of droplets during coughing and sneezing, by “covering of the mouth and nose with the subsequent destruction or the disinfection of the handkerchief”³ or having “iodized gauze at hand, ready for use.”¹

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Competing interests: No competing interests

- 1 Gauze masks for men on transport keep flu at bay. *Stars and Stripes*. November 1918. www.loc.gov/resource/20001931/1918-11-01/ed-1/?sp=1&r=0.158,0.487,0.685,0.325,0.
- 2 Byerly CR. The U.S. military and the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919. *Public Health Rep* 2010;125(Suppl 3):82-91. doi: 10.1177/003335491012505311 pmid: 20568570
- 3 The fight against the ‘flu: hints and hopes. Interview with Sir J Crichton-Browne. *Observer*. 2 March 1919. <https://img.newspapers.com/clip/49258280/the-observer>.
- 4 Greenhalgh T, Schmid MB, Czypionka T, Bassler D, Gruer L. Face masks for the public during the covid-19 crisis. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1435. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m1435 pmid: 32273267