

READER'S FORUM

## The 1918 Spanish flu outbreak that devastated a Greek island underlines past lessons that must never be forgotten

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of Spanish flu, which is estimated to have killed more than 50 million people worldwide. One area that was devastated was the Aegean island of Skyros, where the first cases appeared following celebrations for the feast day of Saint Demetrios at the end of October 1918. The island, which is the largest and southernmost island of the Northern Sporades, had 3200 residents and one-third of the 3000 people who were infected died (1).

Ancient Greek Mythology recounts that Skyros was where Achilles spent his youth. Knowing that Achilles would be slain in the battle of Troy, his mother Thetis sent him to the island where he was hidden in the Palace by King Lycomedes. Sadly, the mortal population of Skyros did not share Achilles' near-invulnerability when the influenza arrived. In Greece, the first cases of influenza were reported in the summer of 1918 and during October and November 1918, there was an influenza pandemic outbreak across the country, including several Aegean Sea islands, such as Andros, Naxos and Euboea, where several deaths were reported. However, the influenza outbreak on the island of Skyros was exceptionally severe and fatal. The Athens journals did not report any cases in Skyros

earlier in the year, as in other parts of Greece, which is why the incidence and death rate in this isolated population may have been so high. According to Constantinos Faltaits (1891–1921), a prominent author and journalist of the last century, the influenza outbreak in Skyros began on 27 of October 1918 and its onset was acute 'like a thunderbolt' (1). His description provides a unique account of how Spanish Flu affected the Greek population and his annals, published in 1919, contain a particularly touching passage:

'...and the people in Skyros were dying. They were dying all the time; during the day and during the night. Without any doctors, without medication, without anyone to care for them. They were dying together, they were dying embraced. They were dying sitting down, standing up and lying in their beds. They fell dead at their table, or into their empty fireplace. They fell dead on their footstools and on their stairs. They fell dead while kneeling to pray at their Byzantine Icons... (1).

At that time, the viral cause of the influenza, which predominantly targeted healthy young adults, had not been detected, but the worldwide effects were devastating, with the 50 million deaths affecting all age groups, including infants and children (2,3). It was initially attributed to *Haemophilus influenza*, and it was not until the 1930s that an H1 subtype was identified as the causative strain of the 1918

influenza outbreak, which led to this Aegean islands' tragedy. It is essential that we continue our research on vaccine development and influenza antiviral medications, to ensure that such devastating public health events are not repeated (4). Paediatric health professionals and allied health professionals should be prepared (2), and medical education on our historical past is a necessary part of this process.

### References

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