



Wellington volunteers and the 1918 flu epidemic

NO ONE EXCEPT THE NURSE OR ATTENDANT TO ENTER ROOM.

MILD CASES.

1. Keep chest covered with flannel, if patient has slight cough and pain in chest. **DON'T OVER COVER.**
2. Keep patient in bed for about a week; with open windows but no draughts.
3. Give "standard influenza medicine" if feverish, and follow directions on bottle. (Medicine can be obtained from Depot.)
4. Gargle thrice daily with salt and borax (1 teaspoonful of salt, 1 teaspoonful of borax to 1 cupful of warm water).
5. Opening medicine, 1 or 2 pills at night, and, if necessary, salts before breakfast.
6. Diet: If feverish, fluids only, cream &

SERIOUS CASES.

1. Prop patient up in bed, if breathing is bad.
2. Note colour of face; if any blueness, notify nurse.
3. Keep chest and face well covered with cotton wool or flannel, **RIGHT UP TO THE NECK.**
4. If pain in back or side, poultice with

5. Give plenty of light drinks, such as barley water, lime juice, thin soups, beef tea, and milk and soda water.
6. Stimulant every 4 hours, either 1 tablespoonful of brandy, or whisky

EXTREME.

- HÆMORRHAGE** (or bleeding from the mouth).
1. Send for the Doctor at once.
 2. Prop patient up high; then raise **HEAD** of bed by means of blocks or 2 strong boxes.
 3. Place a bolster under patient's knees, and tie each end of bolster to head of bed, to prevent patient slipping down.
 4. Give ice to suck. (Ice can be had any hour by ringing 'phone 3708 day or night.)

VOLUNTEER WELLINGTON | TE PUNA TAUTOKO
 Your Community Connector

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH.

INFLUENZA.

INSTRUCTIONS TO VOLUNTEER NURSES OR FAMILY

Wellington volunteers and the 1918 flu epidemic

PATIENT TO BE ISOLATED IN BRIGHT, WELL VENTILATED ROOM.

BE SURE WINDOWS OPEN FULLY.

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VOLUNTEER WELLINGTON | TE PUNA TAUTOKO
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Foreword

In 1918, New Zealand was hit by an influenza epidemic which is hard for us to imagine today.

The epidemic claimed the lives of some 9000 New Zealanders – and it killed those in the prime of their lives, aged 25 to 45, rather than the very young and very old.

In Wellington, more than 730 died.

For 2 to 3 weeks at the height of the epidemic, ordinary life was impossible. Shops, offices, and factories could not be staffed, and the Government closed schools, hotels, and theatres.

Shipping from port to port came to a halt and many towns suffered from a shortage of basic supplies, such as flour and coal.

The mayor of the time, John Luke, was concerned about the increasing cases of illness. The Town Hall became an important centre for dispatching medicines, organising clothing and where the vehicles serving as ambulances left from. Even small quantities of spirits were given out for those with doctors' notes.

It was a time when the city needed to respond to the crisis and not for the first or last time during a disaster, volunteers came to the fore.

Wellingtonians have always responded to disasters and hard times by pulling together to support each other.

Many people would not consider what they do for neighbours and their community as volunteering but volunteering in New Zealand is understood as work done of one's own free will, unpaid for the common good.

During the 1918 epidemic, volunteers took on a range of tasks, just as volunteers do throughout the city now.

The 2016 Kaikoura earthquake gave us a reminder of how we need to be prepared for the next disaster and how we will again rely on volunteers.

Wellington is one of 100 cities to join the Rockefeller Foundation's Resilient Cities network. The network helps cities survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of stresses and shocks they experience.

Volunteers remain very much a part of this resiliency in Wellington.

Justin Lester

Mayor of Wellington

Introduction

The following account of the volunteer contribution to Wellington's response to the 1918 influenza pandemic is an inspiring record and a credit to all those involved in its compilation. The so-called 'Spanish' flu of 1918 was an unprecedented challenge to New Zealand's hospitals and health services at a time when about a third of its doctors and nurses were serving overseas with the armed forces in the Great War. Yet the country rose magnificently to the challenge and many people, regardless of age or condition, stepped forward to help the stricken. This was New Zealand's worst public health disaster, in which about 9,000 people died. It had taken 4 years of war to kill 18,000 New Zealand soldiers, yet half that number, mostly civilians, died in less than 2 months at the end of 1918.

How would we cope today if something similar occurred? New Zealand society has changed enormously since 1918, and some of the clubs and organisations that provided volunteers in 1918 no longer exist. Back then the country was organised for the war effort, and people had been conditioned to think in terms of duty, sacrifice, and bravery. Critics suggest that New Zealand society today is much more individualistic, selfish, and materialistic than it was 100 years ago, and they may be right. Yet the response to the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010–11 suggests that we still have ample reserves of 'social capital'. Neighbours helped neighbours, and student volunteers joined country folk to help shovel silt from homes affected by liquefaction.

New Zealanders are renowned as friendly, practical, and adaptable people. Whatever the future may hold, whether the threats be from earthquakes, floods, fires, or pandemics, let us hope that there will always be enough brave and public-spirited people available to help those in need. But in the meantime, we should all prepare ourselves for adverse events, and be self-reliant as far as possible. Knowing how we coped with past emergencies will help us to be confident about dealing with future challenges.

Geoffrey Rice

Emeritus Professor of History
University of Canterbury

Volunteers and volunteering

Volunteering happens across the globe. For some, it is a formal arrangement, one they undertake regularly. For others, volunteering is a response to a crisis. Both present needs and opportunities for people to reach out to help others.

Late in 1918, a clear need emerged for help to cope when the influenza pandemic reached New Zealand. This was not the regular seasonal influenza. Instead, it seemed to be a new strain of the disease, with much harsher symptoms than regular flu and targeted at a different population, especially fit men and women in the prime of life. Towards the end of 1918, troop ships were sailing into Auckland harbour with soldiers who had completed their service and were keen to get home. Those from out of Auckland wasted no time in heading for the station to catch the first train to their home town. By this time, probably unaware, many were carrying the infection. Even those who were feeling unwell would not have known that their disease was highly contagious and could spread to others as simply as by a handshake or an unguarded cough. In 1918 knowledge about how such disease could spread did not exist.

The quick dispersal of the soldiers around New Zealand was followed just as rapidly by the spread of the epidemic. The first deaths occurred in Auckland from mid-October: Wellington's turn began at the beginning of November. The call for volunteers was sounded at the same time.

Many heard that call and responded. Typically, their names and stories were not recorded, but we know that neighbours helped neighbours and that other people travelled across town to offer their support to those in need even if they did not know them. Their efforts should not be forgotten.

This publication, remembering their contributions, comes from the combined efforts of a volunteer team of researchers and writers, a volunteer graphic artist and a volunteer project coordinator. Thank you to Brendan Sweeney, Lynne White, Ann Hodson, Ida Bagus, Aditya Manuaba, Julie O'Brien, Sharon Kirk, Alex Birch, Hilary Stace, Max Kerr, and Sue Hobbs.

We have cited a few stories researched and written by some of the volunteers working on the 1918 Influenza Project based at Karori Cemetery. This has been a 2-year project to clean and tidy the grave sites of the nearly 670 people buried in Karori Cemetery during the 1918 influenza epidemic and to research and write about the lives of some them. More than 180 stories can be found at <https://1918influenzakarori.weebly.com>.

Aileen Davidson

Manager Programmes, Volunteer Wellington

PUBLIC NOTICES.



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH.

INFLUENZA.

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Notice from the Department of Public Health, The Press, 23 November 1918

Why volunteers were needed

In the early stages of the epidemic there were insufficient medical staff in the country, including Wellington. Nearly a third of the country's medical practitioners were overseas in November 1918.¹ For those left in New Zealand, avoiding overwork as they struggled to deal with the epidemic was a recognised challenge, and there were times when doctors and nurses could not work because they themselves had become victims.

Quite simply, volunteers were needed because no-one else was available to undertake the myriad of tasks that went with taking care of the sick, the dead, and those recovering. At times, the needs seemed insatiable.

Helpfully, the Department of Public Health published a poster with instructions for volunteer nurses or family attendants, so people knew what they had to do. There was a strong emphasis (in bold type, in block capitals) that the patient was to be isolated in a bright airy room and an injunction to 'be sure windows open fully'.

How the voluntary effort was organised in Wellington

During November 1918, newspapers began to fill with urgent appeals for more volunteers for relief organisations. Some of these included appeals for more medical assistance to coordinate relief efforts, others called more specially for women who had been trained as nurses. The tone suggested that quick responses were expected: invariably, requests emphasised that the appeals were 'urgent' and that helpers were needed 'at once'.²

In the early stages, central government seemed to downplay the scale of the crisis and it rebuffed the approaches of Wellington's Mayor, John Luke, for a systematic organisation of the relief effort. The change came after 6 November when influenza was declared notifiable as a 'dangerous infectious disease' meaning that more reliable information could be assembled about the scale of what the country was facing. On 12 November the Minister of Public Health, Hon George Russell, sent a telegram to all local government heads outlining a scheme for organising relief and leaving the initiative with local government to implement. Mayor Luke sprang into action, calling a citizens' meeting for the next day. After

¹ Rice, Geoffrey, *Black Flu 1918*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2017, p 38

² *New Zealand Times*, 7 November 1918

some wrangling, the meeting agreed to adopt the block system that Auckland had pioneered. A Wellington Citizens' Vigilance Committee was established, led by the Mayor, with members including Peter Fraser, newly-elected as MP for Wellington Central, and his Labour Party colleague Harry Holland, to oversee the work of 16 districts, most of them taking the local school as the focal point for their operations. In some districts, volunteers were already being organised, and in the others the district committees led the charge. Districts were able to draw on the organisations that had been set up to coordinate volunteer efforts during the war, and this infrastructure and the tradition that went with it was an important source of strength for community responses to the epidemic. Each committee



Medicine Department at Wellington Town Hall
(Ref: 1/2-C-016207-F, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. /records22328319)

was expected to take the initiative to do whatever was necessary, reporting in regularly to the coordination centre at the Town Hall.

The Town Hall assumed other roles too, including serving as the dispensary for medicines that volunteers could then distribute around the city and becoming the hub for much of the transport required to ferry food and drinks and other essential supplies to where they were needed.

Getting access to health services at the time was expensive and poorer people could not afford doctors or medicine. Peter Fraser got around this in Wellington Central by arranging for the medicines to be provided to those in need and for the bill to be sent direct to the government.

As their work got under way, volunteers monitored neighbourhoods house by house. This meant that they came across flu victims who had not yet received medical or other help including young children whose parents were ill or dead. The volunteers' reports helped to build a more complete picture of the scale of the epidemic and identify where help was most needed.

Establishing temporary hospitals was a key part of the response, especially because the public hospital needed to be reserved for only the most severe cases. A helpful by-product of the government decision on 12 November to close all schools was the release of suitable premises that could be used as temporary hospitals, with beds and other equipment provided by the Army from their supplies at Trentham.

Most of the larger temporary hospitals were spread across the central city, close to where they were most needed: the over-crowded, unsanitary lanes and alleyways of Te Aro flat.

Location	Beds available ³
Wellington College	105
Normal School, Thorndon ⁴	91
St John's Schoolroom, Dixon St	67
St Patrick's College, Buckle St	48
Sydney St Hall	41
Alexandra Hall, Abel Smith St	20
Mt Cook Girls' School	NK
St Andrews' Schoolroom, The Terrace	NK
Brooklyn School	32
Seatoun School	10
Moore's Hall, Johnsonville	23
Missions to Seamen Hall	35
SS Takapuna	60

The Union Steam Ship Company's coastal steamer, *Takapuna*, tied up at Clyde Quay, became a floating hospital especially for seamen and waterside workers, and when that reached capacity, the Missions to Seamen Hall was turned into a second hospital for this group. Other premises were also given specialised roles: the hall at St Anne's church in Newtown became a convalescent hospital, and the Salvation Army Training College in Aro Street was freed up to become a convalescent home for women. The Infectious Diseases Hospital (then in Stanley Street, Newtown) made 50 additional beds available.

It was a major task to establish and equip this network of temporary hospitals but finding the voluntary helpers to staff them became the bigger challenge, one that continued until the epidemic had run its course. Wellington newspapers carried daily calls for voluntary helpers to sign up. On 16 November, for example, the *Evening Post* published a call from the Newtown Committee to let everyone know:

All men and women who are willing to help, either with personal attendance or gifts of soups, gruel, and other necessaries will be gladly welcomed at Newtown School.

And reinforcing the message:

Many families are in dire straits. Help is needed now! ⁵

³ Table compiled from Lenihan, Rebecca, *Calamity in the Capital: The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Wellington*, 2005 VUW, p 57 (taken from a list published by *The Dominion* on 22 November 1918); and Rice, Geoffrey, *Black November: the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand*, 2nd edition, Canterbury University Press, 2005, pp 100, 102, and 103. NK means not known.

⁴ A normal school is one where teachers are trained.

⁵ *Evening Post*, 16 November 1918



People inside an inhalation chamber in Christchurch, similar to the chambers established throughout Wellington (Ref.1/1-008545-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. /records/23252768)

Helpers were needed also to operate the inhalation chambers that were being established across the city as places for citizens to receive a dose of zinc sulphate fumes which were thought, misguidedly, to be useful as a preventive. In the absence of alternatives, though, people queued for treatment, possibly spreading infection as they crowded in waiting.

One of the side benefits of the Government's decision on 12 November to close the schools was the addition of a fresh source of volunteer workers – older schoolchildren and teachers – to augment the pool of helpers. The Minister of Public Health was frank about his expectation. At a meeting with teachers on 13 November,

he asked the teachers to be good enough to volunteer to do what work they could to help the authorities during the present crisis...[His] suggestion was well received.⁶

Extra hands also came from the staff of large businesses, led by the example set by Kirkcaldie and Stains Ltd, which closed its doors on 12 November.

Both men and women volunteers came with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. They included school teachers, ex-nurses, shop assistants, librarians, clerks, and typists. Many of them had to be trained on the job. For those assigned to help with nursing care, the Minister of Public Health emphasised that being qualified was not expected:

It is not necessary that women to nurse in the homes of the people in these distressing circumstances should hold nursing certificates. Any women who have had experience in nursing can obtain the necessary advice from medical practitioners as to the lines of action to be taken in nursing patients.
(Hon George Russell quoted in *The Dominion*, 12 November 1918)

Nevertheless, nurses were specifically targeted. As early as 12 November, the Hon Organising Secretary of the Women's National Reserve advertised for all women willing to help nurse during the epidemic to apply to the Reserve's office, as soon as possible.⁷

Perhaps reassuring to potential volunteers uncertain if they had the skills needed, advertisements summarised the types of work to be undertaken by 'public-

⁶ *Evening Post*, 14 November 1918

⁷ *The Dominion*, 12 November 1918

spirited citizens'. On 26 November 1918, for example, the list in *The Dominion* covered:

- 1 Visitors capable of observing and reporting cases to District Headquarters
- 2 Kindly Women prepared to undertake duty in the Homes of the Sick (MOST URGENT)
- 3 Volunteers for Night and Day Attendance in Homes, especially the poorer (MOST URGENT)
- 4 Volunteers for Nursing in the Public Temporary Institutions (MOST URGENT)
- 5 Motor Cars
- 6 Volunteer Motor Drivers
- 7 Volunteers who can undertake Cooking
- 8 EXTRA ASSISTANCE OF ALL KINDS, especially in the thickly-peopled City Areas.

Peter Fraser and the committee for Central Wellington

Peter Fraser gathered a group of his friends and colleagues into the committee at the St John's schoolroom in Willis Street and from there coordinated the volunteer effort in the Central district. Fraser and his team of volunteers went door to door. They encouraged people to isolate those who were sick or took them to the temporary hospitals (in donated or commandeered vehicles, including the Mayoral car) for nursing care. They helped wash and disinfect houses. They prepared and distributed food and medicine and found carers for children whose parents were sick or had died. Peter Fraser advertised his personal phone number, 'Wellington 1919', for those who needed help and personally knocked on hundreds of doors. Te Aro flat in the central city, with its boarding houses and slums, was very badly affected due to overcrowding and close contact, poor quality housing, a lack of access to public health services, poor sanitation, inadequate supplies of clean water, and widespread poverty. Half the deaths in Wellington were from this area.

Like many other volunteers, Peter Fraser caught the flu but recovered. He was strongly affected by his experience during the epidemic. Two decades later, as Minister of Health and later Prime Minister in the first Labour government he brought in policies to improve access to public health, housing and welfare. His biographer wrote: His faith in the working classes was heightened by the courage and public-spiritedness with which many humble people had laboured to defeat the epidemic. When his committee disbanded he told its members that in any like emergency in the future he 'could not wish to work with a more loyal and unselfish group of workers.'^a

^a Thorn J, *Peter Fraser: New Zealand's wartime prime minister*, London, Odhams Press, 1952, p 55
Bassett Michael with King Michael, *Tomorrow comes the song: a life of Peter Fraser*. Auckland, Penguin, 2000, pp 85–88
Yska Redmer, *Wellington: biography of a city*, Wellington, Reed, 2006, pp 125–129

People were also asked to help with supplies: everything from clean bottles and jars, with corks, to demijohns, needed for transporting liquids such as beef tea, Bovril, and blackcurrant drinks to those needing sustaining food to help their fight with the disease. Other kinds of food were also sought, thought to be suitable for invalids, such as custards, blancmanges, and jellies.

New volunteers were constantly needed as people succumbed to illness. Developing teams would have been a challenge with a constantly revolving membership, and training people, even in the simple but vital tasks of recording what they found as they moved along the streets of their district, would have taken time and effort from the more experienced workers.

We do not know how many citizens were drawn into this massive volunteer effort, but we can say with certainty that the wider community was involved in great numbers and in a huge range of tasks, taking over laundry duties, cooking, caring for patients and cleaning homes all at a time when there were few labour-saving devices.

On the other hand, we do need to acknowledge that some people did not come forward to help. Newspapers picked up on this following a letter from William Foster, the chair of the Wellington East Committee, published in the *New Zealand Times* on 22 November. After commenting on the long hours that his eight nurses were working, from 6am to a little before midnight, he wrote:

On that same Saturday afternoon, sir, every court of a well-known tennis club was filled with young men and women, and others were awaiting empty courts all afternoon, sir!....but if they were able to play tennis, could they not have found a more noble channel in which to expend their energies? ⁸

What they did

With a large proportion of the population laid up and out of action, the list of jobs for those putting up their hand to help was long and varied. The short list included nursing, preparing food and distributing it to people in need, serving as a driver, laundry work, identifying who needed help, providing accommodation, and cleaning – lots of cleaning.

Nursing

Following the end of the war, Wellington faced a severe shortage of doctors and nurses. The remaining trained nurses and ‘medical men’ had a number of volunteer teams help in caring for the flu sufferers. Keeping up the liquid intake of

⁸ *New Zealand Times*, 22 November 1918

feverish patients and sponging down those with high temperatures were vital nursing tasks undertaken by volunteers. Young women (nuns, teachers, factory workers, and clerks by occupation) assisted the nursing divisions while orderlies (usually male volunteer citizens such as seamen) were given specialist training by the doctors in charge, and directed to attend to new cases, examine the ill, and offer any available advice and care.

At this time, nurses were expected to resign when they married. Mollie Beagley, with 3 years' experience, had complied when she married earlier in 1918, but was more than happy to volunteer her services when the epidemic arrived.



Nurse Hickey alongside an ambulance in Wellington during the influenza epidemic (NZ Free Lance, 5 December 1918, reproduced in Rice, Black November, p 102)

Nurse Mollie Beagley

After completing her training, Mollie worked as a nurse for 3 years at Blenheim's Wairau Hospital, but her formal career finished when she married in April 1918. With no children, she was keen to respond to the call for volunteers with nursing skills and was attached to the group working at St Andrews Church on The Terrace. It is likely that she contracted influenza while working there. She was taken to the Normal School temporary hospital in Thorndon and died there on 24 November. She was clearly well-liked and respected by her co-workers. On her grave in Karori Cemetery, there is a plaque which reads:

In Honoured Memory of Nurse Beagley wife of Private N A Beagley d 24 Nov 1918. She gave her life nursing in the epidemic of 1918. Erected by her fellow workers.^a

^a <https://1918influenzakarori.weebly.com>

Preparing and distributing food

Across the city, soup kitchens were established where groups of volunteers assembled to cook large quantities of hot and nutritious soups for flu-stricken households too ill to cook for themselves. Soon, the delivery of these soups (mainly by the citizens' committees and Boy Scouts) became critical to the survival of thousands of invalids. In support of the volunteers, the Sisters at the Sacred Heart Convent provided many meals for Wellington's relief workers.⁹

⁹ Lim-Kwan, Danielle, *Epidemic Kitchens*, <https://nzinfluenzaepidemic.weebly.com/response-and-actions.html>

Food was often donated. For example, Italian fishermen and residents of Island Bay donated supplies of fresh cod and butterfish. At one point, the Berhampore and Island Bay Committees issued a special appeal to the fishing community:

We are in urgent need of Fresh Fish for our own patients and also for all Temporary Hospitals. You can help the Special Committees with your boat and fishing gear and we feel sure you will respond right heartily. Arrangements will be made to take delivery at the Beach if you will clean before landing.¹⁰



Invalid feeding cup, courtesy of Ann Hodson

Eggs, milk, barley-water, beef tea, custard, jelly, blackcurrant drink, rhubarb, gruel and sago were among the goods donated by local farms and families. One worker at the headquarters of the Wellington East Citizens Committee told a reporter:

We have a good supply of all these things but could do with more, especially more custard. ...That is what all the patients ask for now they are beginning to get convalescent.¹¹

Driving

Early on it became apparent that moving medical supplies and assistance to the homes of flu sufferers was hampered by a severe lack of transport.

Local papers called on the public to volunteer with their vehicles, which were to be converted into makeshift ambulances and hearses and driven by volunteers. The response was slow at first, but as the situation worsened more people came forward.

In a late November edition of the *Evening Post*, a volunteer car-driver commented on the value of the vehicles:



All kinds of vehicles were converted for ambulance work (Courtesy Wellington Fever Hospital, cited in <https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/spectrum/20140223>)

¹⁰ *The Dominion*, 22 November 1918

¹¹ *New Zealand Times*, 23 November 1918

If it had not been for the telephones and the motor-cars, we would never have caught up.... We could not have coped with the hundreds of calls but for these things.¹²

Despite this, the supply of drivers never fully matched the level of need, and organisers also found that many of the vehicles offered were not appropriate for transporting the sick. One driver measured the state of the epidemic by the goods he transported:

We car-drivers get a pretty good idea of how the epidemic is going by the passengers and parcels we carry, and [I] can say that in my district things are getting much better. We have been carrying food all day. Before that it was drinks, and before that medicine.¹³

Volunteers could find the hard work personally rewarding. Margery Lees, from a wealthy family in Bolton Street, had been taught to drive and could use the family car while her husband was at war. When the influenza epidemic arrived, Margery volunteered at a local soup kitchen, offering to use her car to visit residents in boarding houses to see if people were ill, and to take them food and doctors when needed. She reported feeling thrilled that she finally felt useful.¹⁴

Linen washing

As the epidemic spread, the need for clean, fresh linen mounted. Groups of volunteers were put to the task of disinfecting hospital linens to prevent the infection being spread by contact with the sheets used by previous flu sufferers. However, by volunteering in this way, these groups were constantly exposed to the influenza virus and put themselves at great risk of contracting the flu.



Volunteer nurses disinfecting linen in Christchurch during the epidemic
(Ref 1/1-010498-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. /records/23133468)

Identifying where help was most needed

Those needing help were encouraged to put out a white cloth or flag at their door or letterbox to signal incapacitation. Each community needed to monitor new flags appearing each day to focus its efforts on those in most desperate need.

¹² *Evening Post*, 23 November 1918

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ *Spectrum* – ‘Two Wellington Childhoods’, 1972, ID15569 RNZ Collection, Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision

Offering accommodation

As the epidemic worsened, finding housing for those affected became critical. Many children were left to fend for themselves as their parents fell ill or died and a call for accommodation was published in the city newspapers. The Wellington East Committee captured the mood.

One sad result of the prevailing epidemic is that in some families CHILDREN ARE LEFT, BY THE DEATH OR PROSTRATION OF THEIR PARENTS, IN A PITIFULLY DESTITUTE CONDITION. [The Committee] has now taken up the question of CARING FOR THESE LITTLE ONES until the time of immediate stress is past. We, therefore, appeal with confidence to the kindly-disposed citizens of this District who are unable to take part in Visiting Work but who are willing to take care for a little while of one or more of these destitute children.¹⁵

Seeing the need, the directors of the Miramar Golf Club offered the Mayor use of the golf-house where the children would soon be temporarily re-housed. Some citizens also offered accommodation in their own homes as well as clothing, books, and toys, and help came too from the Home of Compassion in Island Bay.

Cleaning the City

As officials came to terms with the crowded quarters and filthy state of Wellington city, it became apparent that fresh air would be most important in combatting the disease. The public were told to open all doors and windows (though many insisted on keeping them firmly shut) and groups of volunteers were tasked with various cleaning duties in a bid to disinfect the city.¹⁶

The volunteers undertook their cleaning with gusto.

The different groups were enthusiastically taking up and making a feature of cleaning up the city. A spirit of emulation was engendered into the work; in fact, a spirit of competition was setting in.¹⁷

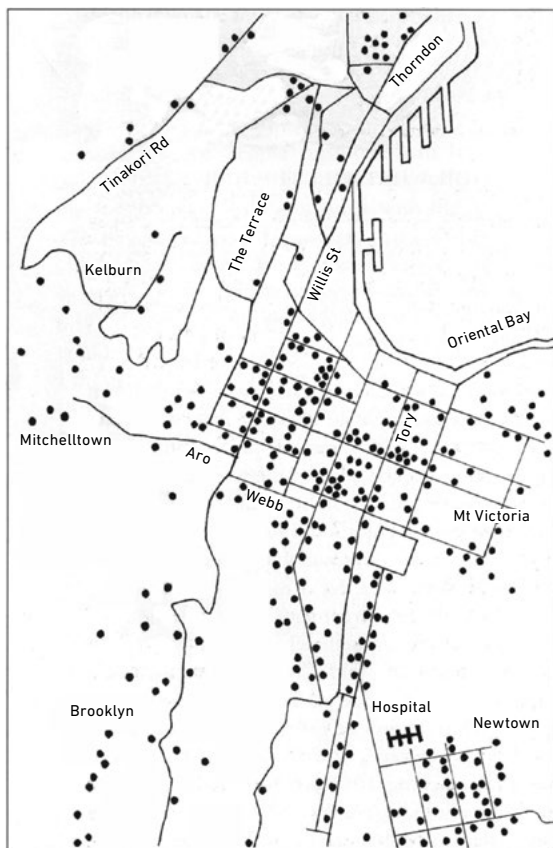
In Wellington, the incidence of deaths caused by influenza clearly correlates with areas of the city that were widely seen as overcrowded and unsanitary and therefore ripe for cleaning-up. Geoffrey Rice has highlighted the areas in his map showing the residential addresses of those who died.¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Dominion*, 23 November 1918

¹⁶ *New Zealand Times*, 23 November 1918

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ See Rice, Geoffrey, *Black Flu 1918*, 2017, p 43



Distribution of influenza deaths in central Wellington, showing concentrations in the Te Aro Flat area and Newtown
 (Rice, Geoffrey, *Black November*, p 112)

Who volunteered

Volunteers came from many segments of Wellington's population. They included trained nurses, Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of Compassion, doctors, those linked to St John and the Red Cross, scouts, people whose workplaces had shut as a disease prevention measure, and everyday citizens. Individual status was unimportant as the number of deaths across the city grew and volunteers were needed for tasks they had never undertaken before. For some, their efforts proved fatal as they too succumbed, but the volunteering work continued until the epidemic died out.

Some women, their time free when schools, offices, or shops closed, became lay nurses. Both men and women served on block committees for their suburb or district, answering phones, preparing daily status reports, organising volunteers, or checking on those reported to be ill. Others helped more locally by attending

to their families, friends, and neighbours as much as they could, especially where there were young children who needed care and feeding.

Nurses

Because many nurses caught influenza themselves, there was an acute shortage of trained nurses in Wellington which meant there were many requests for volunteers. Nurses were the first to be sought in the advertising for volunteer help.

Kai Tiaki Nursing Journal, January 1919, reported that one trained nurse to about seventy or eighty patients in hospital was the average workload, and for the less severe cases, who remained in their own homes, only untrained help was available.

It recorded that trained nurses worked ‘with the utmost devotion’, while those who had left nursing long before returned to nurse in the epidemic

with more strenuous toil than ever before they had known ... Young girls and youths, who had never seen a person die or even ill, worked among these delirious, terribly distressing cases in the Emergency Hospitals, and bravely stood up against the shrinking inevitably felt.

One girl who blanched at seeing her first corpse was told not to show ‘the white feather’. Many school girls and boys and young students of massage and medicine also worked in the hospital wards.¹⁹

Collaboration in providing care

Dr Elizabeth Gunn and Nurse Luke formed the medical staff at Sydney Street temporary hospital and Mrs McFarlane of the Hotel Cecil supplied hot meals. Two names that stood out in the tributes later paid by other epidemic workers were Major Gibbs and Major McCristell who equipped temporary hospitals with beds and brought medical orderlies from Trentham camp.^a

^a Rice, Geoffrey, *Black November 1918*, p 95 and p 103

Sisters of Compassion

Based in Island Bay, 15 nuns from the Home of Compassion were recorded as ‘working magnificently’ in the southern and eastern suburbs. The chairmen of the Berhampore and Island Bay Vigilance Committees expressed huge gratitude for their contribution. The nuns also nursed at St Patrick’s College, (then in Buckle Street) where Sister Clotilde and four others led a voluntary nursing staff

¹⁹ *Kai Tiaki Nursing Journal*, January 1919, p 13

of 18. While they were working, their colleagues from the Sacred Heart Convent fed them, sending enough hot meat and potatoes for 24 people each day.²⁰

One of the nuns based at the Home of Compassion, Sister Natalie O'Meara, herself became a flu victim. Although she was a nurse, she was not involved in nursing the sick in 1918 because her primary role at the convent was overseeing the nursery. Despite attempts to isolate the children from the rest of the house, infection did reach the nursery and many of the children became ill. She was thought to have caught the flu herself when she visited her sick brother early in December. By 8 December, a visiting doctor pronounced her dangerously ill and 5 days later she died.²¹

Extract from *The Great Epidemic – Reminiscences of Sister Angela Moller, one of the Sisters of Compassion*

On November 13, Sister Claver, who was acting Superior-General at the time Mother Aubert was away in Europe, offered the Mayor eight Sisters from the Island Bay Home. This was in response to the Mayor's Appeal for volunteers. Sister Claver was referred to Mr Dolin who welcomed the Sisters gladly. Three motor cars, plus drivers, were immediately placed at their disposal and they set to work at once, Sister Claver herself leading them that day.

By Friday 15 November, the [Berhampore and Island Bay Vigilance] Committees had assigned a motor-cyclist, with side-car, for Sister Clotilde's service alone, for she had to visit all the cases and supervise the work of the sisters most of whom were St Johns Ambulance medallists and quite competent to carry out her instructions. She had also a couple of Boy Scouts placed at her service, one of whom was always in attendance to carry her messages to the depot, or to her sisters if she wanted the latter.

The corps of Boy Scouts deserved the highest praise for speed and efficiency. They rose to the occasion splendidly and threw themselves wholeheartedly into the work with as much if not more ardour than any of the other workers.

At Island Bay, the Committee had everything in thorough order by the end of the first week, and the epidemic under control within ten days or so. But no sooner was order established at the Bay, then Berhampore was assailed badly. The sisters also covered this area. Here conditions were worse, and the outbreak lasted longer.^a

^a *Sisters of Compassion Memoirs: The Great Epidemic, Reminiscences of Sister Angela Moller*, held by the Home of Compassion, Island Bay

²⁰ Rice, Geoffrey, *Black November*, p 102

²¹ <https://compassion.org.nz/sisters-stories/sister-natalie-omeara/>. See also Sister O'Meara's story on <https://1918influenzakarori.weebly.com>.

Sisters of Mercy

The *Evening Post* reported that 'very excellent work' was done at the St. Anne's Convalescent Home by the Sisters of Mercy, aided by several other voluntary workers including the convent girls. The institution was for the accommodation of convalescent seamen, and they were 'well cared for indeed'.²²

Sisters from St Mary's Convent

Nuns from the St Mary's Convent in Thorndon worked as nurses and carers across the city. They visited people in their homes who were too ill to get out of bed and worked in some of the temporary hospitals including those at St Patrick's College in Buckle St and the Normal School in Thorndon. The demand was incessant. Many times, new patients were being admitted while those who had recently died were being carried out. The wards were busy with many people needing a high level of care. Some patients became delirious and got out of bed, running from one ward to another.

Sister Mary Chanel's story

She had had one particularly busy day nursing and on her way back to Kilbirnie, called in at the Newtown Convent where the Superior noting how poorly Sister looked, tried to persuade her to stay overnight. Sister said she had to go back to Kilbirnie to get some more medical supplies and return to a sick patient where she proposed keeping a night vigil with the patient. When Sister did not come down to the community for tea, they went to her room and found she had died. 'Greater love than this no man hath.'^a

^a From notes held in the Archives of St Mary's Convent, Guildford Tce, Wellington

Businesses

Some large business firms acted on their own and closed for a week or more during the worst of the epidemic. Kirkcaldie and Stains, retail drapers, released hundreds of workers to nurse at home or volunteer for relief work, while their restaurant provided meals for the central bureau supporting the temporary hospitals. Sydney Kirkcaldie stayed on duty with his motor car at the Town Hall for whatever service was needed. Many other businesses helped in any way they could.²³

²² *Evening Post*, 2 December 1918

²³ *Free Lance*, 28 November 1918

Soldiers

Food supplies to the capital were not at first seriously affected by the epidemic, since most shops were well stocked and could easily call the warehouses of the major distributors for further stocks. Milk supplies from the Hutt Valley were maintained by soldiers from Trentham Camp who volunteered to help local farmers and butchers who somehow managed to keep up with the demand for beef.²⁴

Boy Scouts

Boy Scouts made a great contribution during the crisis. Volunteer drives specifically targeted the Scouts aged between 12 and 16 and they turned up day after day ready to be messengers for the sick.²⁵ The advertising became a regular feature in the Wellington newspapers throughout the second half of November. On 15 November, for example, the Evening Post advertised:

The officers directing the Boy Scout messengers want more volunteers, particularly for Newtown, Hataitai, Kilbirnie, and Lyall Bay centres. In the absence of scoutmasters, many of whom are laid up, scouts should volunteer direct to the committees, or parade at 9 o'clock each morning outside the Y.M.C.A., Willis Street. Committees without scouts are asked to organise local boys for the work.²⁶

St Hilda's Scout Troop in Island Bay delivered food to people too ill to source it themselves. Scouts were given a level of responsibility hard to imagine today, such as the power to break in to houses if they believed those inside needed help. They were also to stop motorists and ask for them to take patients to a medical centre. Their volunteering work was recognised by the government and by the people of Island Bay, who presented the Troop with a carrying flagpole, engraved with a message of thanks.^a

^a Southern Bays: *Magazine of the Wellington Southern Historical Society Inc*, No 2, 2006, p 32

The work of the Scouts was widely praised. The Minister of Public Health, Hon George Russell, declared that:

among the workers who have done yeoman service in fighting the epidemic are the Boy Scouts ... These fine lads have done a vast amount of work in carrying

²⁴ Rice, Geoffrey, *Black November*, p 110

²⁵ *New Zealand Times*, 15 November 1918

²⁶ Bennett, Charlotte Jayne Sylvia, *Now the war is over, we have something else to worry us: New Zealand Children's Responses to Crises, 1914–1918* (<http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/2280?show=full>).

messages and food, visiting houses, and generally assisting the health authorities and the volunteer organisations, and I feel that the Government is under a deep debt of gratitude to the Scouts.²⁷

Contribution of other young people

As well as the Scouts, adolescents across New Zealand volunteered to help those ill with the flu during the pandemic. Some households worked with local organisations that provided community-based support for influenza victims in late 1918, preparing and delivering food, and delivering medicine. Older children were more likely than younger ones to become involved in relief work within their wider districts. At the time many adolescents were not kept in quarantine by their parents and were considered old enough to answer the calls for relief-workers.²⁸

Salvation Army

The Salvation Army was also heavily involved in relief efforts. Its magazine *War Cry* commended the people of Wellington for organising help during the crisis and said that the response to the epidemic was drawing people together. It reported that Salvation Army padre Staff-Captain Burton, burying those who had no other arrangements made for them, had conducted seventeen funerals in one day. His shoulders were sore from carrying coffins, and he was still burying many more. He supplied workers to the neediest cases and kept in close touch with others. He was commended in the local newspaper for his efforts.²⁹

On 30 November 1918 *War Cry* reported that Brigadier Hoare of the Salvation Army had organised volunteers at the Wellington College Temporary Hospital, using both Salvation Army members and other volunteers. They were working 12-hour shifts.³⁰

On 7 December 1918, *War Cry* reported that the Salvation Army was finding temporary homes for children whose parents were dead or incapacitated and asked for donations. The magazine also recorded that a Salvation Army officer



Engraved message of appreciation on flagpole presented to the St Hilda's Scout Troup

²⁷ *Evening Post*, 26 November, 1918, p 17 quoted in <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/2280?show=full>

²⁸ Bennett, Charlotte Jayne Sylvia, Op cit

²⁹ *War Cry*, 23 November 1918

³⁰ *War Cry*, 30 November 1918

had adopted a baby whose nearest family had died of flu when there were no other relatives able to take her in. Bandsmen played at scores of homes, institutions, and hospitals to cheer the sick. *War Cry* noted that the Salvation Army had already warned the government about the slum conditions in towns and cities without any action being taken. It hoped the flu epidemic had highlighted the ongoing problem of slums and overcrowding.³¹

Reconnecting families

It was not always easy reconnecting wider families with children whose mothers died in the epidemic as those admitted to care perhaps under pressure of numbers, did not always have their identities well documented. One story is told by descendants of Te Paea Taite, from Tuwharetoa who was living in Lyall Bay when the epidemic struck.^a The couple had three young children, two daughters and a son born in August 1918. When Te Paea died on 22 November at the Wellington College Temporary Hospital, her children were put into care for a time.

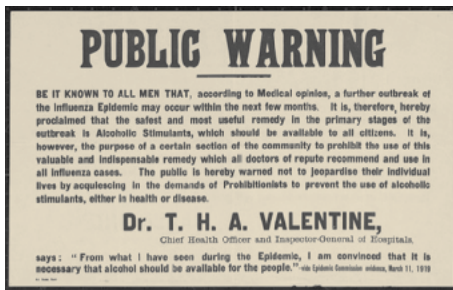
Wider family members immediately travelled to Wellington to claim their mokopuna as soon as they could on learning of their fate. (Te Paea's husband Wi Kepa te Riu/Taite te Popo was in England on tribal business and quarantined on his return.)

The late kuia Kaa Rakaupai (cousin to the three children) related the story c.2003 of the time when Ngati Tuwharetoa kaumatua heard that Te Paea had passed away and that her children were in an orphanage/hospital. Kaa who was a young girl at the time travelled with the kaumatua to Wellington with the intention of collecting these children to bring them home to Tuwharetoa rohe. On arrival they were shocked to see so many orphans and because of her youth and keen eyesight she was told to fetch the two girls which seemed an easy task. However, because Shay, their brother, was still a baby she had difficulty locating him amongst the other babies and the tohu the kaumatua told her to use to identify him was the whanau trait of having big eyes. One by one she held-up babies for the old kaumatua to inspect and since Shay had the 'big eyes' they gave their approval. At that time kui Pura Kiore had also learned about the mokopuna in Wellington and travelled by horse from Tokorangi, Halcombe a distance of 98 miles. On arrival Pura collected Shay and returned home with him in tow and both on horseback.^b

^a Te Paea was probably living at the large residence in Queen's Drive, the Wellington base of the Te Heuheu family.

^b Chase, Lou, 31 August 2018 email to Jenny Robertson. See also <https://1918influenzakarori.weebly.com>

³¹ *War Cry*, 7 December 1918



Public warning of second wave of influenza
(Ref: Eph-C-ALCOHOL-Continuance-1919-01.
Alexander Turnbull Library)

The aftermath

However deadly and disruptive the influenza epidemic was, it was also over quickly. By late November the epidemic had peaked or decreased in most parts of the country, and by early December it was effectively over.

In very many cases the survivors were left to adjust to life without their loved ones and sometimes to face health and financial issues that would last for the rest of their lives.

The Department of Public Health was heavily criticised and the government responded by setting up a royal commission with wide powers of investigation. This later led to the passing of the Health Act 1920, about which Geoffrey Rice commented, 'At the time it was widely recognised as a model piece of health legislation, said to be the best of its kind in the English language'.³²

In the influenza epidemic, Wellington's volunteers rose to the occasion with families and neighbours helping each other, and many volunteering to assist complete strangers in a potentially deadly situation and for an unknown length of time. Without the efforts of the volunteers, the impact was likely to have been much worse. Their intervention allowed many of the sick to stay at home and recover and undoubtedly resulted in the saving of lives. People 'got on with things' as well as they could, often having to provide their own leadership and to adjust priorities daily. The situation was the same up and down the country. As Geoffrey Rice has noted, the response to the epidemic in New Zealand testified to the resilience of the human spirit.³³

³² 'Response to the influenza pandemic', <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1918-influenza-pandemic/response>, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, p 6, updated 13-Jan-2016

³³ Rice, Geoffrey, *Black November*, p 281



DOMINION OF NEW ZEALAND

Influenza Epidemic,

1918.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY that
W. M. Selwyn
rendered valuable service during the
Epidemic as a voluntary honorary
worker, and is hereby awarded the
thanks of the Government.

G. W. Russell

Minister of Public Health.

Certificate of thanks for volunteer support during the epidemic
(Reproduced in Rice, Geoffrey, *Black Flu 1918*, p 8)

One hundred years later

Ann F Hodson writes:

Two years ago, during a chance encounter with Barbara Mulligan, ex-colleague and friend, I learnt of her latest initiative, the Karori Cemetery 1918 Influenza Epidemic project.

Little did I realise when I offered to help clear and tidy neglected graves of the flu victims that I would be embarking on an unexpected personal journey of discovery. It was, I thought a great idea and something I could do, especially, as I miss no longer having a garden and anyway the exercise would do me good! But more than that, my interest in the history, biology, and social impact of the epidemic was piqued.

So, armed with gloves, a rake, broom, and an assortment of used toothbrushes, I joined others similarly prepared. Before we were let loose, Jarod Cohen, from Karori Guardian Memorials was there with cautionary advice of the care that we would need to take when working with water and a toothbrush, to remove decades of layered grime from headstones, without dislodging the lead lettering. The sense of elation was palpable as fellow volunteers revealed the inscription on a headstone. It was also sobering as we realised that thereby lay a story of someone's parent, child, sibling, work mate, friend, or neighbour. With time many of these stories were divulged due to the research skills, patience, and perseverance of the team of volunteer genealogists and writers. Posting these biographies on the project's website by another volunteer has been a plus, eliciting not only enquiries from near and far afield but sources of additional information.

During the project a selection of these biographies was shared with us during the winter indoor meetings. We were also treated to presentations from various specialists including Dr Ryan McLane from the Ministry of Health's Pandemic Planning team who outlined the tragedy of the spread of the influenza in the Pacific. Retired Minister of Religion Harry Nicholls, with an earlier career in public health, joined us in Gum Gully and shared his insights.

One of the many benefits of spending time with a team of volunteers working with a shared purpose is the chance to meet new people. Volunteering for this citizen-initiated Wellington community-based project has been just that and so much more for me.

Not only were there networking opportunities, a chance to make new friends, gain new skills, knowledge, and experiences. There was a totally unexpected bonus. Barbara Mulligan, at the close of one of the Sunday monthly clean-ups, said, 'Follow me!' Curious, I did just that. Recalling that I'd mentioned that I

was no longer able to find my way to the burial site of my paternal grandparents I thought I knew what was in store. But it was not my grandparents' grave that she led me to but that of my paternal great grandfather, James Edwin Hodson. He was an unknown to me. To discover that he had died at the peak of the influenza epidemic was both sad and disquieting. Thanks to a fellow volunteer, a skilled genealogist, this long overlooked family member took on a persona. It has been exciting and moving for me and others in the family to become acquainted with him; such a vital link in our history.



Great progress being made by a group of diligent workers on a working bee in Gum Gully, Karori Cemetery

Reflecting on this, I tried to imagine how it must have been for volunteers in Wellington during those unexpectedly challenging, devastating, and heart-breaking weeks that the influenza epidemic raged. How different the experience was in so many ways for those teams of volunteers from those we experienced during the Karori Cemetery 1918 Influenza Epidemic project, and yet how much had not changed for volunteers.

A unique link for me between the events of 1918 and those of 2018 has been the glimpses of the impact of volunteers. It has been a reminder that volunteering is life-changing not only for those who volunteer but for those whose lives we touch; and a confirmation that at the heart of volunteering is the practical and ever generous spirit of good will.

This booklet produced by Volunteer Wellington is a record of the invaluable impact of volunteers as it captures some of the stories of those volunteers who lived the experience of the 1918 influenza epidemic in Wellington alongside those volunteers who 100 years later have sought to remind us of New Zealand's worst disaster.

This project has forcefully demonstrated that volunteering is *mahi aroha*.

.....

Ann put a set of questions to some of the project volunteers about why they became involved and what they gained from the experience.

Beverly Hamlin said:

Since arriving in Wellington to live in 2004, I worked full-time until recently so was looking for a project that took me out into the community. In November 2016, following an article in the local newspaper about the influenza project, I contacted Barbara Mulligan to offer my assistance. My time and interest in family history allowed me to become involved in a project such as this.

My contribution has been to research and write some of the stories of the flu victims selected from the four areas of Karori Cemetery where the project is concentrated. I will also be helping with the administration, particularly getting all the documentation ready for the open day tours, along with any general assistance to help make this commemoration a successful event.

Being involved in this project has brought people together that I didn't know beforehand and has helped in widening a circle of people with like interests.

From a personal level I have been delighted to see the stories from all the researchers completed and added to the project's website. There is a good feeling being able to help others write their family's story and share their feelings when all the research has come together.

Philippa Parsons said:

I saw a small advertisement in a local newspaper asking for people to help clean up the graves in the Karori cemetery of those who had died in the 1918 influenza epidemic.

I was immediately drawn to this as a great aunt died from influenza leaving behind my great uncle and several children. I knew they had emigrated from England and had no family in New Zealand until my grandmother married a kiwi soldier and came to Wellington after WWI. My great uncle survived until 1956 and my mother remembered visiting him with her mother. The children were lost from the family. My motivation to volunteer was in the hope that I would meet people who could help me find the resources to discover my family history.

My role began as a volunteer cleaning graves in the different areas of the cemetery. My first experience was in the Church of England section and I was able to clear the family grave which was just an unmarked plot overgrown with grass and weeds. A talk from a local monumental mason gave me a lead into providing a headstone for the plot. Knowing that there was a rich family story behind an unmarked plot gave me insight into the depth of stories behind each plot that we cleaned. There were unexpected surprises revealing interesting snippets of the lives of those buried.

From cleaning and clearing there opened an educational side as talks were arranged and books recommended. Invitations to attend public lectures followed and my knowledge of the influenza increased and my interest in what life was like in Wellington at that time was also piqued.

With help from the genealogists and project researchers I started to collect information on the children of my great aunt and uncle who had been put into an orphanage after their mother's death.

I have been able to contact living grandchildren and have started to build a relationship with some whereby we can swap family stories and photos.

For some people making contact was a delight to enrich their family knowledge. For others, they were not interested in knowing more of their past. There is still more to discover, and I hope to continue the exploration.

Jenny Robertson said:

My great-great uncle's wife (Mary Gravenor HOOD) died in the flu epidemic in Wellington in 1918. I felt the project was a good way of helping mark this centenary both by practical cleaning and clearing work in the cemetery as well as in researching and writing about the lives of some of those buried there. I felt it was important to jog public memory of this short sharp shock to Wellington life at the end of World War I.

I love history and first heard about the project through a genealogy newsletter. My partner and I joined it early in 2017. I felt it would be good for us to be able to work together on a project having each started on some family history research of our own in 2012. It was a good way of bringing together a variety of people with different skills to contribute to a practical community project that was also genealogical. It appealed to me that we would publish our stories online which would make it easy to get them out there.

I was amazed at the size of the turnouts on cemetery working bees and while I gave the cleaning and clearing of graves a good go, I also got stuck into researching the histories of those who died and helping others work on their stories too. We put together a workshop to show the sorts of records that would illuminate a life and also collaborated with individuals on their family accounts. In a year and a half, I have written over 70 stories, and made input into another 35, and wish I could have accomplished more.

I wanted to improve my ability to tell a story and to write more richly about the context of the lives of a whole range of Wellington residents who were affected by the flu. It was important to me that the focus was not only on the rich and famous but also on the diversity of those who have helped make Wellington what it is

today. Every person I have researched has been interesting, even when information sources do not deliver a lot. I have learnt a lot about Wellington, what records can be accessed, and who in this town to go to for assistance or feedback when dealing with the history of communities I have not written about before. This project has helped grow my networks and no one has turned me away. Writing old-fashioned letters to people has worked well to draw in family information. Many people are chuffed that we want to follow up on the lives of their ancestors. Based in Wellington, it is easy for me to send out-of-town descendants photos of the houses their relative lived in or of their business premises or pages of funeral registers showing who paid the bill and where they were living at the time of their death.

I enjoyed getting to know a whole new group of people, their skills and interests, and energies for projects such as this one. I love the pursuit and have been happy to help those who wanted assistance with finding out more about their relatives and their lives here. Working closely with individuals greatly enriched the stories as family photographs helped bring a sense of connection that was otherwise missing. I have also been touched by the great sadness in some families to this day over what happened to their parents and grandparents as children when their mothers died and their fathers put them into orphanages and vanished from their lives. Many people experienced lasting impacts, especially on top of the war, with the depression and another world war to come. Every generation has its challenges but people in 1918 had it hard and there was not that much support available unless it came from friends, neighbours, churches, or the wider family.

I now know a lot more about Wellington 100 years ago, about influenza and pandemics, and about the strength of communities and individuals who helped each other survive. I know just how grateful to be to public record holders such as Papers Past, the National and Alexander Turnbull Libraries, the Wilson and Lychgate funeral home records, Archives New Zealand, and the city council archives in Wellington. I have also had an opportunity to keep improving my writing of life stories too!

Stephen Stewart said:

My wife, Moira, and I took part in a free Karori Cemetery tour led by Barbara Mulligan, I think it was one of many activities organised for Wellington's 150th anniversary. Barbara told us (and other members of the public) how on her regular cemetery tours she had wondered why so many soldiers (and others) died in November 1918. This led to her interest in the 'Spanish' flu and its centenary in November 2018.

She mentioned the dilapidated state of many of the victims' graves and showed

us many of them. She asked for volunteers to help tidy them up. Moira and I have since taken part in many working bees with other volunteers.

It feels rewarding, particularly as many of the victims' descendants have been unable to look after the graves themselves. Wellington City Council does a good job of maintaining the cemetery, but the scale of the place and the number of the 1918 influenza victims means it is impossible for WCC to care for every plot. It was amazing seeing what 20-30 people could do in designated areas in a few hours.

Barbara also explained about commemorative events planned for November 2018, creation of a website featuring the lives of more than 180 victims buried in the cemetery, and the work of genealogists in researching their backgrounds. We attended a few meetings Barbara organised and heard a fascinating speaker, Dr Ryan McLane, talk about the pandemic. Much of his information was revelatory.

As a former newspaper journalist and sub-editor, I then offered to help edit the genealogists' work. It has provided a fascinating insight into early Wellington. The main revelation (which I hope the public will see when they look at the website and take part in the commemorative tours planned) is that the victims are not just numbers, but real people from wide-ranging backgrounds. The stories are inevitably tragic, all are fascinating, and give a new insight into life in our capital 100 years ago.

My curiosity was so piqued that I have also written two features for the news media, aimed at publicising the November events. I did this as a public service, since many people nowadays have little knowledge of this terrible pandemic. The centenary of the end of the First World War will get lots of attention in November, yet the worst pandemic to strike the world in modern times could have been largely forgotten. The work of Barbara and her small team of volunteers on a community project unique in New Zealand will ensure it isn't.

Max Kerr said:

I saw the project as a new way to use the skills and knowledge I have developed exploring my own family history. It was also a way to pay tribute to former Wellingtonians who otherwise were in danger of being forgotten.

I worked on both main strands of the project: first, helping with cleaning the graves of some of those buried in Karori cemetery, so that they once again presented the appearance of being cared for; and secondly, researching and writing up the lives of almost 40 of the victims. That second role sometimes drew on the research of other members of the project team (so that my role was to check what they had found out and then write a story about it), but more frequently, I undertook the research myself and wrote it up as I went along.

Like most skills, the skills of researching and writing need to be honed regularly or they lose their edge. The project certainly gave me lots of scope to do that. It also gave me the spur to find out about aspects of our history that I knew almost nothing about, and to do so at the level of the people directly involved rather than in a more general treatment that smoothes away the insights and nuances that come from the stories of individuals. As well, the project gave me the chance to meet and work with a new group of people with shared interests.

It has been hugely satisfying to shine some light on the stories of a group of people who were otherwise at risk of being largely forgotten. In a small number of cases, we have been able to get in touch with descendants of some of the flu victims, and invariably they have expressed their surprise and delight that their ancestor has been remembered through the project. On occasion, they have been able to contribute family information that we would not have known about, but there have been other times when what we have found out has added to their understanding of the life of their relative. In addition, I have gained a new appreciation for Wellington's development as a city and a deep admiration for how people pulled together to cope with serious adversity.

Afterword

The 1918 Influenza Karori Cemetery Project would not have happened without volunteers – people who gave up their time and put energy into a programme of work which honoured and commemorated the many people of Wellington who died during the influenza epidemic in November and December 1918 and were buried in Karori Cemetery. Those involved as volunteers wanted no tangible reward – they wanted to do something which was of intrinsic value, enhanced our heritage, and had positive outcomes. They turned up to working bees and seminars, they put their hands up to take on genealogical research, they took photos, looked after the website, edited stories and assisted with administration of the project activities. Without them there would have been no project and those who died in 1918 of influenza in Wellington would have continued to be ignored and forgotten.

In 1918 when the epidemic was raging, volunteers were essential – they weren't needed because they wanted to feel good about what they were doing, but to save the lives of many people, support neighbours and the wider community, and deliver essential services. Nevertheless, their motivation must have been the same – they responded to a need and assisted wherever they could. Their motivation to volunteer may have been elevated by their knowledge that friends, family, and the wider community were sick and dying in unexpectedly high numbers, but they chose to respond and work alongside the professionals or just in their immediate neighbourhood, without reward and mostly without much acknowledgement or support. Many people survived when they would not have otherwise because a volunteer gave them support when they most needed it. Their activities were critical in managing those who were ill, needing food and fluids, nursing and medical care.

Volunteerism continues to be a community good and all our lives are better for it. Long may it continue.

Barbara Mulligan

Project Coordinator

1918 Influenza Karori Cemetery Project

Creating theatrical narrative from historical events

Kerryn Palmer



Flicking through old family photos I found this one of my Grandfather and his eight siblings.

Intrigued by the faces of the children in the photo, which was taken in January 1919, I discovered that the nine children had been orphaned 2 months earlier. Their father William died in Petone in November 1918, followed 2

days later by their mother Ethel. They had both contracted and died of influenza at the height of the Spanish Flu.

The more I began talking and reading about what had happened to my family, the more I realised that many people were unaware that such an event had occurred. An event that killed over 9000 New Zealanders in little more than 2 months. An event that saw thousands of New Zealanders risk their own lives to help out their neighbours and friends, during what must have been a terrifying and highly stressful time.

Theatre is a medium that can immerse an audience in a time period and a narrative in a unique and powerful way.



Plays seek another kind of truth [as opposed to history books]. They seek a psychological truth, an emotional and spiritual truth...³⁴

Being a theatre maker, I wanted to tell the story of the 1918 influenza pandemic and show the way that ordinary Wellingtonians coped with New Zealand's worst public health disaster. I wanted to do this in a way that would give audiences the feeling of the enormity of the disaster as well as the chance to question what they would do if such an event happened in modern day New Zealand.

³⁴ Spencer, Stuart, *The Playwright's Guidebook*, Faber and Faber, London, 2003, p 161



In 2013 STAB at BATS theatre commissioned playwright Rachel Callinan and me to create *Pandemic*. With a cast and crew of nearly 50 people, *Pandemic* was presented over two venues and included a bus ride through Wellington. It was an immersive, promenade-style play that historically recreated a slice of 1918 Wellington.

In 2018, in commemoration of 100 years since the pandemic, I led third year theatre students at Victoria University to create their own version of the events that happened in November 1918 and presented; *Black November 1918*.

Both productions were a culmination of much hard work, (often voluntary!) research, and the passion to tell New Zealand history in a way that evoked an emotional connection with our ancestors and past events.

For more information about these plays and the resulting scripts, please contact Kerry Palmer kerrynlisa@hotmail.com
<http://www.pandemic1918.co.nz/black-november-1918/>



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Front cover: Emergency ambulances outside the Wellington Town Hall
during the 1918 flu pandemic.

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/wellington-ambulances-during-influenza-pandemic>
(Ministry for Culture and Heritage) updated 11-December-2015.



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