

“SEND ONLY YOUR SERIOUS CASES.” DEIVERING FLU TO TORONTO: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 1918-19 INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC IN TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

Karen Slonim

Dr. Lisa Sattenspiel, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This project looks at the 1918-19 pandemic influenza experience in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Based on historical records (most notably death registries and archival material) this work strives to understand the social, biological, and environmental conditions that facilitated the spread of this virulent microorganism throughout the city. Grounded in the anthropological frameworks of evolutionary medicine, political economy and syndemics, this dissertation is designed to present a qualitative historical account of the pandemic in one of Canada's largest cities. This piece adds to the growing body of literature aimed at documenting one of the most catastrophic events of the 20th century. It also explores how epidemics are shaped by and in turn shape history. Many of the key findings of this work stem from the relationship between the Great War and the H1N1 strain responsible for Spanish flu. Soldiers appear to have brought the disease to Toronto and the conditions generated by the prolonged conflict in all likelihood increased individual susceptibility (via. increased stress, sustained food shortages and promotion of status incongruity). It is important to note however, that the effects of the war were not all detrimental to the population of Toronto. Sustained investment in the military effort promoted the development of informal networks of care, which were paramount in the city's effort to curtail influenza mortality. This dissertation generates as many questions as it answers, with the main message being that an analysis of infectious disease experiences must be cognizant of the two-way linkages between culture and biology.