

**From Migration to Mining
Medicine and Health in Australian History**

Suzanne Parry
Editor

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Cover and Conference logo: Rock art depicting a coastal trader
by an unknown Aboriginal artist, late nineteenth century,
Nourlangie Rock, Northern Territory.

Photograph: Dr Brian Reid

Health Service History

Health Service Development in the British Solomon Islands 1945 to 1975 <i>James Macgregor</i>	139
In 1950 a Cottage Hospital: In 1991 A Teaching Hospital - With Comments on the Bridging <i>Keith Powell</i>	149
The Pacific Medical Service <i>Margaret Spencer</i>	161
The Tenth Australian General Hospital: A Personal Pilgrimage <i>John Whitehall</i>	167

Diseases

Migrants, Measles and Osler's Error <i>John Gault</i>	187
The Enigma of Pink Disease <i>Desmond Gurry</i>	190
Insidious Immigrant: Spanish Influenza and Border Quarantine in Australia 1919 <i>Anthea Hyslop</i>	201
The 'Temporary Insanity' Epidemic on Pitcairn Island 1886 <i>Anders Källgård</i>	216
The Ravages of a 'Mother': The History of Yaws in Australia <i>John Thearle</i>	223
Kaposi: The Man, The Myth, The Legend <i>Peter Winterton</i>	230

Biography

A Post-Mortem on Herod the Great <i>Don Barrett</i>	237
Harold Griffiths Dicks - A Notable Outback Doctor <i>Peter Burns</i>	243
Caroline Bruins: The First Woman in Dutch Paediatric Cardiology - A Disciple of Helen Taussig <i>Simon de Knecht</i>	246
Cilento's Mosquito-Safe Air Route: Insights into Health Provision for the Isolated in the Thirties <i>Fedora Fisher</i>	251
'of great use in a prolonged attack': The Inventions of Sir Hiram Maxim <i>Brian Fotheringham</i>	258
Eric Payton Dark <i>Ben Haneman</i>	263
Beaney's Books <i>Brenda Heagney</i>	271
Two Early Medical Women at Sydney University <i>Anthony Proust</i>	279
A Social Perspective of Medical Practice on the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales in the Nineteenth Century <i>AJ Proust</i>	284

INSIDIOUS IMMIGRANT: SPANISH INFLUENZA AND BORDER QUARANTINE IN AUSTRALIA 1919

Anthea Hyslop

In October 1918, elaborate measures were introduced to prevent the entry of the Spanish influenza pandemic into Australia. At first, federal health authorities doubted whether maritime quarantine, however strictly observed, could exclude a disease so virulent; but by the year's end they were congratulating themselves on their success. Then in January, Spanish influenza broke out in Melbourne and, while federal and state experts debated its identity, soon made its way to Sydney.

Thereafter, ostensibly following an agreed plan, all states save Victoria imposed quarantine restrictions at their borders. But, in effect, each went its own way, with chaotic results. Interstate trains were halted at nearby townships and their passengers herded into makeshift camps for a week's isolation. More than one state leader had trouble getting home from the January premiers' conference in Melbourne. New South Wales accused Victoria of wilful negligence; while Victoria derided its neighbour's insistence on border quarantine between two infected states. Queensland applied restrictions of its own devising, in defiance of the federal agreement, while South Australia refused responsibility for border camps. Western Australia ran short of foodstuffs as cargoes were waylaid on land and sea. Tasmania all but severed its contacts with the mainland for an economically damaging six months. Relations between Commonwealth and state governments became seriously strained. And the pandemic, which had raged unimpeded overseas, took almost a year to work its way around the country.

The impact of border quarantine raises several questions. Why was such a policy advocated? Why did such confusion ensue, and with what results? What did border quarantine involve, and how did it affect the course of the pandemic? Would Australia have fared better or worse without it?

It is generally said of the Spanish influenza pandemic in Australia that it proved too great a trial for the fragile internal loyalties of a young Commonwealth. The acrimonious federal relations that accompanied the crisis have been represented by Humphrey McQueen as a 'breakdown of the Federal principle', a serious setback for Australian nationalism. In his 1973 paper, McQueen compared the pandemic's impact with the unifying influence of the war just ended, and offered this sombre comment:

In the realm of national consciousness Gallipoli had forged unity and identity through its projection of a character type. But national character

is a poor base upon which to advance a State apparatus capable of generating patriotism sufficient to override regional, class and religious loyalties. In 1915, an external menace had driven Australians together; by 1919, an internal danger revealed yet again how easy it was for Australians to stand apart. If national unity involved loyalty to the Commonwealth as an administrative machine, the Pandemic showed how little of it there was.¹

Whether or not one accepts this view of things, there is no denying the hostility that developed between Commonwealth and states, and also among the states themselves, once the disease was known to be at large. Dissension and recrimination pervaded their exchanges, as influenza spread through the community. Before that, all governments had been fairly united in the face of the pandemic's approach and, in anticipation of invasion, had even collaborated upon a series of measures to control its incidence on land. It was chiefly in implementing these measures that the parties fell out; but their differences over implementation stemmed directly from the delayed diagnosis of Spanish influenza in Melbourne, and from the consequences of that delay.

In September 1918, influenza had already visited Australia in a milder form, with the first epidemic wave that emerged from the United States in the northern spring of that year. Although 'moderately severe' at this stage, it gave scant indication of what was to follow.² But, by August, the influenza virus had mutated to produce a disease characterised by sudden onset, marked pneumonic traits and an alarming mortality, especially among younger adults. This lethal second wave now swept around the world, exacting a death toll of many millions.³ By October, it had reached South Africa and New Zealand, whence came news so grim that Australia promptly instituted rigorous requirements for maritime quarantine.⁴ By these means, even with many thousands of troops returning home after the Armistice, the pandemic was confined to quarantine stations for almost three months, chiefly at Sydney's North Head and at Woodman's Point, south of Perth. At the outset, though, such remarkable success was by no means assured. JHL Cumpston, director of the federal quarantine service, gave warning that a disease as deceptive, and as rapidly-transmissible, as influenza would be extremely difficult to exclude.⁵ It, therefore, seemed prudent to prepare for the worst.

In late November 1918, the Commonwealth government convened a conference of the health ministers, health department heads and British Medical Association branch presidents of the various states, to plan what Cumpston termed a 'uniform scheme of operations' for controlling any outbreak of Spanish influenza and limiting its further spread.⁶ Chaired by W Massy Greene, Minister for Trade and Customs, the conference endorsed a range of preparatory measures; each

state should appoint an advisory committee of medical experts, establish vaccination depots and special hospitals, organise doctors, nurses and ambulance transport and circulate advice to local authorities. In the event of an outbreak, the afflicted state should prohibit public meetings, 'close all places of public resort, such as theatres, music halls, picture shows, race meetings, churches, schools', and regulate the out-patient departments of its general hospitals.⁷ In addition, there should be 'local district isolation and quarantine'. This last was an internal measure, like the rest, but one which reflected the enthusiasm of the state governments for land quarantine, a policy they were eager to pursue on a national scale.

The federal authorities did not share this enthusiasm. According to Massy Greene, they doubted whether the Commonwealth's quarantine powers could be used effectively for 'establishing a border line' against influenza. They believed, in any case, that land quarantine would be quite simply impracticable for any part of the mainland, with the possible exception of Western Australia.⁸ Cumpston, for his part, might also have had in mind the uproar provoked in 1913 by his efforts to confine smallpox in Sydney.⁹ But the state representatives were determined to attempt border controls, and accordingly resolved:

That in view of the heavy mortality attendant on epidemics of pneumonic influenza in other countries, and the evidence that its spread coincides with the rate of human travel, this Conference is of opinion that it is desirable in the public interest to take any measures to check public travel that are at all likely to lessen the spread of the disease.¹⁰

Federal reservations were acknowledged with the admission that 'such restriction does not afford an absolute safeguard, and is liable to prove ineffective at some stage in the course of the epidemic'. The meeting decreed nonetheless:

that the attempt to limit the original outbreak by this means should be made, and should be continued until proved unsuccessful, in order to give neighbouring States time to complete their organization, and also to afford a delay which may result in some diminution of the virulence of the epidemic.¹¹

The requirements of border quarantine called for close cooperation between federal and state authorities. First, a state's chief health officer would at once notify the federal director of quarantine of any case of pneumonic influenza in his state - whereupon the Commonwealth would proclaim that state infected. Next, all traffic with that state would cease, until a case appeared in a neighbouring state, after which traffic between those two could be resumed. Meanwhile, though, interstate shipping would continue under strict quarantine, with federal permits required for passengers from the infected state, and local

interstate traffic within ten miles of the border would be exempted from the ban - in 'clean' areas, at any rate. Once a state was proclaimed infected, the federal authorities would take 'complete control of all Interstate traffic, both by land and sea', while the states, for their part, would 'render to the Commonwealth every possible aid.' The movement of goods and mails would continue unrestricted, 'provided that all care be exercised to prevent personal contact between persons handling the goods'. And lastly, the repeal of any proclamation of infection would rest with the Commonwealth government.¹²

The agreement was signed on 27 November 1918. Six weeks later, with influenza still in quarantine, Cumpston expressed justifiable confidence that the pandemic problem was 'approaching complete solution'.¹³ But, even as press and public hailed this achievement, Spanish influenza was entering the community in Melbourne. Its exact source is unknown, but the maritime barrier may well have been evaded, rather than directly breached, since no link could be traced with persons or ships in quarantine. The lack of such a link was the basis for Cumpston's later claim that the cases first reported on 21 January 1919 were suffering from the milder influenza of the previous year, rather than the dreaded pneumonic type.¹⁴ His view was reinforced by the absence of an initial explosion of cases, such as had occurred overseas; although this suggests that only one or two people, not dozens as elsewhere, introduced the disease into Melbourne. It appears, moreover, that by this time the virus was somewhat less aggressive. Ironically, then, it would seem that the very success of maritime quarantine militated against recognition of Spanish influenza beyond its bounds. However that may be, sufficient uncertainty prevailed among medical experts, some of whom had observed the disease in quarantine, to delay for a week Victoria's declaration of infection. During that interval the virus travelled by train to Sydney, where recognition was swifter, so that New South Wales, with barely a score of influenza cases, declared itself infected on 27 January, leaving an embarrassed Victoria, with over 350, to follow suit next day.¹⁵

To Cumpston, these notifications must have been especially galling. For one thing, they announced the failure of maritime quarantine, which had been so successful for so long. For another, because two states had notified the presence of Spanish influenza, he had to accept their diagnosis without question and act upon it, despite being himself 'not at all satisfied that the disease is identical with that which ravaged New Zealand and the other countries'.¹⁶ Moreover, had he thought otherwise, he would still have had to wait upon the verdict of the states. Here was an anomaly in the November agreement, one that he had pointed out to the Acting Prime Minister only a few days before. The federal authorities, Cumpston said now, were 'regarded by the general public as responsible for stopping the spread of disease to other States', but in effect could do nothing until the infected state gave formal notice. The Commonwealth could not even seek information, except from the state health authorities, yet it

had to make momentous decisions, perhaps unwarranted, or perhaps ineffectual because too late, 'on the bare request of a State'.¹⁷ For Cumpston, this anomaly and its implications emphasised the need for greater federal involvement in public health. Its consequences or, more precisely, the consequences of delay in Victoria - furnished ample evidence for his case.

Already, before any formal announcement, the news coming out of Melbourne had prompted other states to take action. Two had begun inspecting interstate trains, and one had even trespassed upon the federal preserve of maritime quarantine. But worse was to follow, and by early February a federal report, probably drafted by Cumpston, revealed a chaotic situation.¹⁸ Immediately upon notification, New South Wales had suspended all traffic with other states. With Victoria's notification on 28 January, traffic between these two should have been allowed to resume; but instead, New South Wales had responded by closing its border with Victoria and imposing quarantine restrictions on vessels from Victorian ports. On 30 January, the Western Australian government had halted the transcontinental train at Parkeston, five miles east of Kalgoorlie, and placed its passengers in quarantine, notwithstanding that those from Victoria had left that state before its notification, and that South Australia, whence the train had come, was not yet declared infected. On 31 January, the federal authorities had learnt from the newspapers that Tasmania was imposing restrictions upon small sailing vessels from South Australia. By that time, too, New South Wales was banning entry of persons from South Australia, doubtless on the strength of press reports of an influenza outbreak in Adelaide.¹⁹ Then, on 1 February, Queensland had announced that the boundary between itself and New South Wales would be 'absolute' in terms of quarantine restrictions, with no exemption even for *bona fide* residents within ten miles of the border.

The report went on to state the views of the quarantine administration. Given the 'elusive nature of the disease and the administrative difficulties', the November conference had defined the 'maximum provisions practicable' for interstate quarantine. For their part, the Commonwealth authorities had adhered to the agreement 'strictly throughout'. Had they been prepared to depart from it:

it would have been justifiable to have intervened at an earlier stage by investigating thoroughly the cases in Melbourne on or prior to January 22nd so that earlier action for the protection of other States could have been taken.²⁰

As the report had previously noted, influenza cases were first reported to the Victorian authorities on 21 January. But the suggestion that protective measures would have been taken then seems to ignore the fact that, at a conference of medical experts on 23 January, Cumpston himself had agreed with the others that this influenza was not the Spanish sort.

The document's final point, however, addressed the present position:

the Commonwealth cannot now intervene in the direction of taking complete control of the situation with any prospect of profit but with certainty of having to incur considerable responsibility and odium either in the event of failure or because of the burdensome restrictions which would have to be continued after public alarm had subsided.²¹

In effect, all states except Victoria and South Australia were 'interpreting the agreement as they see fit or ignoring it altogether' - and failing to inform the Commonwealth government of their actions. The Commonwealth had therefore two alternatives; either to issue regulations directly clashing with those of the states and to try to ensure their enforcement, or else to warn the states that if they did not promise by a certain date to 'adhere strictly' to the November agreement, the federal government would be 'obliged to withdraw altogether from any attempt to regulate interstate traffic', except for coastal shipping. The first option, if unsuccessful, could make the Commonwealth 'look ridiculous'; so the report advocated the latter course, and Cabinet endorsed it. Urgent telegrams were sent to all the states on 3 February: they must signal within two days their intention to abide by the November agreement, or the Commonwealth itself would renounce it.²²

The replies from the offending states variously expressed injured innocence or righteous grievance. Tasmania first enquired how it had transgressed, and was told that its offence had been to set up quarantine facilities at Launceston as well as at Hobart. By way of excuse, it explained that shipping for Launceston was meant to undergo quarantine at Melbourne, but that great numbers of small sailing vessels came direct from the mainland in summer. Tasmania's government undertook to cooperate, provided it could impose seven days' maritime quarantine, not three, to which the Commonwealth agreed.²³ Western Australia, by contrast, indignantly denied having violated the agreement at all in waylaying the transcontinental train. Instead, it had been 'compelled to act', since the failure of Victoria and South Australia to notify at once the presence of influenza within their borders had tied the Commonwealth's hands.²⁴

In the absence of Premier Lefroy, stranded in Melbourne by border restrictions and a shipping strike, Acting Premier Colebatch, who was also health minister, declared it was 'monstrous' of the federal government to uphold the inaction of Victoria and South Australia, and to 'prefer an entirely unwarranted charge' against those other states which had been forced to defend their own citizens because the Commonwealth was powerless to do so.²⁵

New South Wales blamed only Victoria, source of its own misfortunes, for breaching the agreement. Answering the federal government's ultimatum, a defiant Premier Holman claimed to have had evidence of influenza in Victoria

long before it was notified there. Victoria, he said, had taken action only after his own state's prompt response. At that stage, New South Wales had only a few isolated cases, so Holman had closed the border to prevent the entry of more.²⁶ Queensland was equally determined, insisting that, for a state so large, it was impossible to monitor all the cross-border traffic within the ten-mile zones, and that infected people could easily slip through. But Queensland's greater offence was to insist that *all* shipping, whether interstate or overseas vessels, must serve seven days' quarantine. And, when the military authorities insisted on landing returned troops, cleared through federal quarantine, at Lytton near Brisbane, the Queensland government sought an interim injunction from the High Court to prevent it. Mr Justice Gavan Duffy was not convinced that there was ground for an action in law, since repatriation and defence matters should override state concerns but, out of respect for local sensibilities, he resolved to adjourn the application rather than reject it, hoping that the dispute would meanwhile prove needless (as indeed it did), and ordered Queensland to pay the Commonwealth's costs to date.²⁷

Faced with state recalcitrance, the Commonwealth government duly carried out its threat and on 6 February abandoned the November agreement, restricting itself to full control of interstate sea traffic. Nonetheless it felt the need to justify its withdrawal from land quarantine, saying that federal intervention here would not improve matters. It expressed willingness to assist cooperative states with border inspection of travellers previously declared fit for departure. But it refused to establish quarantine holding camps at each state border; partly because of practical difficulties, chiefly because it believed a hastily established and ill-equipped border facility could lead to tragedy if influenza broke out among the occupants.²⁸ Hence, if any state persisted in detaining all interstate travellers for a number of days, it must do so unaided. This would affect Queenslanders returning from New South Wales to their own still 'clean' state, who took train from Sydney to the northern town of Tenterfield, there to spend seven days in quarantine. It would also affect traffic to and from South Australia, which was similarly stopped at Serviceton in Victoria, or at Cockburn on the line to Broken Hill. South Australia was declared infected on 4 February, but its government maintained border restrictions, seeking to prevent the entry of fresh cases of influenza as if the state were still free of infection.²⁹

For Western Australia, as yet uninfected, the situation was rather different. By this time, its government had halted two more east-west trains, and back in Melbourne Watt had warned Premier Lefroy that, if such 'seizures' continued, the Commonwealth would suspend altogether the railway service between Port Augusta and Kalgoorlie.³⁰ With South Australia's belated notification, the Commonwealth did just that, in accordance with the November agreement. But, when the agreement collapsed, the 'Trans' train still did not run, this time on account of a stalemate. The federal authorities were demanding resumption

of the full service, while Western Australia insisted that train crews must undergo quarantine and that the facilities at Parkeston could not possibly handle three trainloads of passengers a week.³¹

When the first train was halted, there had been no facilities at all. On its arrival, the state authorities had taken complete control; the locomotive was detached and the carriages patrolled on either side by special constables, while health officers examined all 117 passengers and took their temperatures. Everyone was confined to the train for the first twenty-four hours, while workmen shifted cargo.

By the account of its dining car supervisor, the carriages were 'close, hot and dusty', the heat 'torrid during the day', almost worse at night. There was no water to flush the toilets, and the placing of 'sanitary containers' beneath the train to catch their contents 'proved to be a bad experiment', producing an intolerable stench in the heat. For the remaining four days of quarantine, earth closets were provided, together with a 'fumigating chamber' for daily inhalations of zinc sulphate spray. Passengers could now take exercise in an area pegged out by yellow flags; but they still lived aboard the train, because a large marquee, erected for their use, had been blown away by a violent sandstorm soon after their arrival.³²

Two more trains soon joined the first; the Red Cross supplied newspapers and games to pass the time; the residents of Kalgoorlie sent fruit and 'quantities of liquid refreshments'. No passengers fell ill, and by 7 February all had been released. By that time any further services from Adelaide had been cancelled.³³

With interstate shipping almost at a standstill, thanks to state quarantine and industrial action, Western Australia was now effectively isolated. Its only link to the rest of the country was the telegraph, and one western federal politician promptly made use of that to ask the Acting Prime Minister, 'Do you want provoke West into open rebellion against Federal Government?' His message continued, 'State seething with indignation at action Commonwealth authorities in stopping all railway traffic'. In the absence of federal measures, the state had been forced to protect itself, and now the federal government's refusal to allow even one weekly train smacked of 'mere petulance'.³⁴

Western Australia's newspapers quickly extended their condemnation from Victoria to the Commonwealth. The *West Australian* warned against 'the doubtful wisdom of entrusting too much power to a central Government', and suggested that federal Cabinet was either 'subject to Victorian influences' or obsessed with its own 'dignity and constitutional position'. Surely, in dealing with such a 'pestilence' as Spanish influenza, it was better to err on the safe side?³⁵ In the *Fremantle Herald* a cartoon depicted Western Australia fighting an influenza bushfire, while the Acting Prime Minister hung back. Its caption

read: 'Too proud to fight. The Federal Government seems to be suffering under a deep sense of wounded pride over the action of the states in so promptly remedying its remissness.'³⁶

In distant Western Australia, anti-federal sentiments were perhaps never far from the surface. Back east, the *Sydney Morning Herald* confined itself to the quarantine issue, but accused the Commonwealth government of failing 'to appreciate public opinion in States other than Victoria':

A centralised authority is always at a disadvantage in dealing with an emergency demanding prompt and decisive measures. It has never appeared so strangely at fault as in this emergency, when the views of the Commonwealth authority have been coloured by the lethargy and vacillation of Victoria.³⁷

By others, too, the federal government was accused of taking Victoria's part, and its own location in Melbourne strengthened the charge. In Perth, Colebatch termed the Commonwealth's attitude 'so extraordinary as to suggest that once Victoria became infected it was a matter of indifference what happened to the rest of Australia'.³⁸ According to the *Brisbane Courier*, it was not with the states but with the Commonwealth that 'the real parochialism lies'. The federal government might have been expected to support the states' defensive measures, but instead, 'Commonwealth protests have all along been directed against the severity of the restrictions, with the idea of weakening the resistance'. Of the Acting Prime Minister, the *Courier* said: 'Mr Watt...cannot forget that he is a Victorian'.³⁹ Even in Melbourne itself, the *Argus*, while favouring the extension of federal powers for centralised health management, maintained that to have 'complete freedom of traffic' between infected states, irrespective of the nature and extent of their infection, was 'absurd and dangerous'. It seemed to be 'common sense that the other States should be protected against the possibility of danger from Victoria'. As for their departing from the November agreement:

It is unfortunate that the hands of the Commonwealth should ever have been bound by an agreement with the States which the States themselves found it impossible to observe when the crisis came.⁴⁰

In short, effective Commonwealth control was most desirable, but in its absence, and in such circumstances, the states could hardly be blamed for taking action as they did.

The transcontinental wrangle was finally resolved, late in March, by a compromise which largely met Western Australia's demand for thorough protection with seven days' quarantine in camps to the west of Port Augusta and a doctor aboard each train - while ensuring that trains would not be stopped

without federal agreement.⁴¹ Meanwhile in New South Wales, where the trains were still running, far greater numbers of travellers had been accumulating on its northern border, at Tenterfield and at Tweed Heads. As early as 28 January, some 200 Queenslanders were stranded at Tenterfield, many without money. Within a few days, the 200 had become 600 and chaos prevailed, wherein, through uncontrolled mingling, the quarantine of earlier arrivals was compromised with each new influx. Eventually, despite some local opposition, a temporary camp was established at the town's showground, and those who had been waiting a fortnight already were the first to begin seven days' formal quarantine. Ticket rationing at Sydney eased the strain somewhat, and over the next month or so a further 3000 Queenslanders, homeward bound, were filtered through new camps on the Queensland side, first at Coolangatta, then at Wallangarra.⁴²

At first, the travellers trapped in Tenterfield had to find shelter where they could. Some were in tents sent from Toowoomba, but without bedding; many were crowded into churches, halls, and the School of Arts; others found private accommodation, and eleven people slept in one small unfurnished room. Those returning home from holidays soon ran out of money, and one woman with seven children was 'absolutely destitute'. Representations made to the federal authorities in Melbourne went unanswered, so the Queensland government undertook to reimburse Tenterfield for feeding 'necessitous cases', while the New South Wales government gave assistance to needy Queenslanders still in Sydney. Once the showground camp was opened, conditions were still primitive. Members of Ipswich's City Band, fresh from competition triumphs in Sydney, occupied stalls in the stables. Women were mostly in buildings, and men under canvas, but three young ladies contrived to get a tent to themselves in the married quarter, rather than share a pavilion with 80 other women: 'We decided we couldn't stand that at any price', wrote one, in a letter from 'No 71, Buckingham Palace, Quod'. Bedding was in short supply, and infants wailed on every side. The food prepared by a team of cooks from Sydney was 'good when we can get it hot, which isn't always'. Inoculation with a bacterial vaccine was available, but not compulsory.⁴³

At Wallangarra, in early March, several days of steady rain made life damp for camp-dwellers, and a state government food charge did nothing to improve plain fare; meat and potatoes, thick bread and butter, stewed tea. 'To think you pay 7/6 a day for this! It is a perfect disgrace', wrote an irate mother, who had arrived with her four small children during a downpour. Others less burdened could be more cheerful, helping with meals, getting up a concert, and enjoying the camp journal, 'Atishoo! with which is incorporated the Wallangarra Wail'.

At Coolangatta the cooking arrangements were described as 'abominable', but according to the camp's Anglican chaplain, the only malcontents were a 'small

but intensely noisy element of "Bolsheviks", of whom he said it 'was compensation to think that they caused any decent man or woman with a leaning towards their doctrine to be completely cured'.⁴⁴

On the border between New South Wales and Victoria, similar camps operated, notwithstanding that both states were infected, for the New South Wales authorities were intent on minimising the sources of influenza. Not until mid-April did the state government accept federal control of traffic between infected states, while still insisting on the primacy of its own health powers and that the Commonwealth should bear the cost. By the federal regulations, travellers entering the state were required to undergo two medical examinations, one within two days before departure, the other on board the train, and then to report daily to quarantine authorities for three days after arrival.⁴⁵ South Australia had accepted federal control on 6 February, but Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania maintained their own seven-day restrictions on land and sea, despite threats from the Commonwealth government to reduce their shares of tonnage in coastal shipping. Queensland, notwithstanding many cases in maritime quarantine, contrived to keep influenza at bay until the end of April, and held out against Commonwealth control until 19 May. Western Australia did not become infected until early June, and Tasmania remained 'clean' until mid-August.⁴⁶

By all state governments, their own quarantine policies were seen as a justifiable defence against the negligence of others. In those states where the pandemic's onset was delayed, they were also represented as having postponed its attack with benefit, despite being defeated at last. By Cumpston, as federal director of quarantine, the independent actions of the states were judged not merely defiant of Commonwealth authority but also inappropriate, ineffectual, and even counter-productive.

The International Sanitary Convention had condemned land quarantine in 1912, and, in the Commonwealth's view, full control of interstate traffic on land was impossible by any means 'short of complete armed military control along the border'. Failing that, said Cumpston, land quarantine stations were 'either a useless infliction on persons travelling, or a positive danger, not only to travellers, but to the community concerned'. Writing in June 1919, he dismissed as unnecessary and obstructive the camps on Queensland's southern border. If, as was claimed, no case of influenza had occurred in them, then they had 'served no good purpose', having waylaid no infection.

If, on the other hand, cases were overlooked or suppressed, or if infection was introduced by persons evading these camps, then clearly the camps must be considered to be more vicious than useful. Either way, their cost had been 'entire dislocation of national commerce'.⁴⁷

The assessment of WG Armstrong, Deputy Director-General of Public Health for New South Wales, while less severe, was likewise dismissive. Any good results from land quarantine and travel restrictions, he wrote in 1920, 'were very meagre'. This applied equally to interstate and intrastate controls. But even if 'the most stringent measures' could have excluded a disease with infectivity 'so elusive and subtle', Armstrong deemed it 'already too late to impose such restrictions' once Spanish influenza had appeared in Sydney. He commented, 'Where sea quarantine fails in an isolated continent like Australia, land quarantine has small hopes of success'. Moreover, there was evidence that 'at least one person actually suffering from influenza' had evaded all border barriers before dying in a country town. This, said Armstrong, 'was probably not a unique occurrence'.⁴⁸

On the other hand, Armstrong gave no credence to that 'somewhat startling hypothesis' which proposed that a disease, similar to that which had ravaged other countries in turn, had developed 'autogenetically' in each one, at successive intervals that would have allowed for infection to be transmitted by 'the ordinary means of communication'. This was a reference to Cumpston's theory that the disease was not Spanish influenza but a local variant of the disease prevalent in Australia the previous spring. However, while still doubting that the Victorian outbreak was 'the result of introduced infection', Cumpston nonetheless acknowledged that 'the sequence of invasion of the various States is quite consistent with the hypothesis of an infection, introduced, and spreading by human contact.' Western Australia and Tasmania had had least human contact with the states first infected, had applied interstate quarantine 'more vigorously' than the rest, and were the last to be invaded by disease.⁴⁹

There is no doubt that border quarantine seriously disrupted both human travel and the passage of goods on land, causing great personal inconvenience and hardship for border-dwellers as well as those journeying further afield, and even profound distress for some. Still more damaging in economic terms was the prolonged maritime quarantine imposed by the states. The resultant delays to shipping were compounded by strike action, as seamen and firemen sought risk compensation and insurance for death by influenza. By late March, the loss of carrying capacity had created an 'extremely grave' situation: coal stocks for industry, railways, shipping and gas supply were dwindling; Newcastle's steelworks faced closure for lack of limestone; Tasmania was running out of flour and Western Australia faced food shortages and could not ship its timber.⁵⁰ Yet, if the death toll from Spanish influenza were lessened by the delays to its own progress from state to state, then economic disruption and personal hardship might be a price worth paying.

Given the medical uncertainties, and also the human fears, attending its diagnosis, the official returns for Spanish influenza's incidence and mortality

may well have understated the reality, and must therefore be treated with caution. Yet, in terms of deaths per 100 000 of population, the figures for the several states seem broadly to indicate a lower death rate in those infected later, presumably thanks to a decline in virulence. Mortality was higher in New South Wales, with 304 per 100 000, and in Victoria, with 243. By contrast, Queensland's death rate was 156, Western Australia's, 167, and Tasmania's, 114 per 100 000.⁵¹ South Australia, infected early, seems an aberration with a rate of only 118, but this disparity may stem from a combination of local conditions and a local peculiarity of diagnosis, wherein 'influenza vera' confused the picture somewhat.⁵² However that may be, it seems fair to say that those states which staved off the pandemic for a time fared better than those first attacked - just as Victoria and New South Wales, and indeed Australia as a whole, suffered less, through the initial success of maritime quarantine, than other countries where such defences either did not exist or had failed at the outset.

Of the disputes that arose over interstate quarantine, it may also be fair to say with Humphrey McQueen that, for practical purposes at any rate, 'On a range of domestic matters the Commonwealth of Australia passed into recess'.⁵³ But did the behaviour of New South Wales and the other states imply a 'breakdown of the Federal principle',⁵⁴ as McQueen saw it, or did it instead reflect both a continuing commitment on their part to the agreed plan of defence, and a sense of betrayal? - an idea that the Commonwealth was departing from the November agreement, and that the federal power did not sympathise with states' needs? In each case, the Commonwealth's restrictions were less exacting than those of the states, whose governments therefore saw the Commonwealth as seeking to undermine their own efforts. Rightly or wrongly, they blamed Victoria for influenza's first escape, but they also accused the federal authorities of indifference to their fears, and of favouring Victoria's interests. It was not simply, then, a matter of frail federal loyalties caving in under stress, but rather, that the states believed the Commonwealth had let them down.

Endnotes

- 1 McQueen H, 1976, The 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic in Australia, 1918-19, J Roe, (ed), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975*, Cassell Australia Ltd, Sydney, p 143.
- 2 Burnet FM and Clark E 1942, *Influenza. A survey of the last 50 years in the light of modern work on the virus of influenza*, Macmillan, Melbourne, p 73.
- 3 For accounts of the pandemic's global impact, see Crosby AW, 1989, *America's Forgotten Pandemic. The Influenza of 1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and Rice G, 1988, *Black November: The 1918 Influenza Epidemic in New Zealand*, Allen & Unwin NZ and Historical Branch, Department of External Affairs, Wellington. The name, 'Spanish influenza', may have dated from the first wave, but was invariably used to refer to the more lethal second and third waves.
- 4 Cumpston JHL, 1919, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia Quarantine Service Publication No 18, Melbourne, p 54.
- 5 Cumpston, 1919, *Influenza*, p 52.
- 6 Cumpston, 1919, *Influenza*, p 63.

- 7 Commonwealth and States of Australia Influenza Conference 1918. Resolutions, undated typescript, Australian Archives (AA), series A2, item 1919/482, pt 2.
- 8 Cumpston, 1919, *Influenza*, p 65.
- 9 See Roe M, 1984, *Nine Australian Progressives: 'Vitalism' in Bourgeois Social Thought, 1890 to 1960*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, pp 122-24.
- 10 Commonwealth and States of Australia Influenza Conference 1918. Resolutions.
- 11 Commonwealth and States of Australia Influenza Conference 1918. Resolutions.
- 12 Commonwealth and States of Australia Influenza Conference 1918. Resolutions.
- 13 *Argus*, 9 January 1919.
- 14 Cumpston, 1919, *Influenza*, pp iii, 61-2.
- 15 For a detailed discussion of this episode, see Hyslop A, 1997, A Question of Identity: J.H.L. Cumpston and Spanish Influenza, 1918-1919 in *Australian Cultural History*, No 16, 1997.
- 16 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 January 1919.
- 17 *Argus*, 28, 29 January 1919.
- 18 Prime Minister's Department, Files of Papers: Influenza Epidemic. Commonwealth Regulations, c. 2 February 1919, AA, series A6006, item 1919/2/3.
- 19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1919.
- 20 Influenza Epidemic, Commonwealth Regulations.
- 21 Influenza Epidemic, Commonwealth Regulations.
- 22 Influenza Epidemic, Commonwealth Regulations, attached memorandum initialled by WA Watt.
- 23 Commonwealth Regulations, AA, series A2, item 1919/1302: correspondence between Acting Premier Tasmania and Acting Prime Minister, 4,5,6,7,13 February 1919.
- 24 Correspondence: Deputy Premier WA (HP Colebatch) to Acting PM, 5 February 1919.
- 25 Correspondence: Colebatch to Watt, 4 February 1919; also *West Australian*, 5 February 1919.
- 26 Commonwealth Regulations, AA, series A2, item 1919/1302: Holman to Watt, 5 February 1919.
- 27 Correspondence: Acting Premier, Qld, to Watt, 4, 8 February 1919; Quarantine, Lytton, AA Series CP103/11, Item 423: correspondence between Queensland authorities and Commonwealth government, 7-17 February 1919; Quick J, 1919, *The Legislative Powers of the Commonwealth and the States of Australia*. CF Maxwell, Melbourne, pp 458-60.
- 28 *Argus*, 6 February 1919; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1919.
- 29 Premier, SA, telegram to Acting PM, 5 February 1919, AA, series no. A2, item 1919/993.
- 30 *West Australian*, 6 February 1919.
- 31 *West Australian*, 6, 11 February 1919.
- 32 Report of CA Stephens, Acting DC Supervisor, to Superintendent, Port Augusta, 6 February 1919, AA, series A2, item 1919/1311.
- 33 *West Australian*, 5, 6, 7, 8 February 1919.
- 34 Hon J Mackinnon Fowler to Watt, 7 February 1919, AA, series A2, item 1919/1131.
- 35 *West Australian*, 6 February 1919.
- 36 *Fremantle Herald*, 21 February 1919, reproduced in Blackwell B, 1979, *The 1919 Influenza Epidemic in Perth*, BA Honours thesis, Murdoch University, p 23
- 37 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 January 1919
- 38 *West Australian*, 11 February 1919.
- 39 *Brisbane Courier*, 7 February 1919.
- 40 *Argus*, 6 February 1919.
- 41 Correspondence between Watt and Lefroy, March 1919, AA, series A2, item 1919/1311.
- 42 *Warwick Examiner & Times*, 29 January 1919; *Warwick Daily News*, 1, 5, 8 February 1919; *Queensland Times*, 1-19 February, 1-12 March 1919.
- 43 *Brisbane Courier*, 1, 5 February 1919; *Queensland Times*, 8 February 1919; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 February 1919.
- 44 *Brisbane Courier*, 6, 7 March 1919.
- 45 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15, 17 April 1919; Cumpston, 1919, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine*, pp 68, 70.
- 46 *Brisbane Courier*, 23 April, 3 May 1919; *West Australian*, 1-8 June 1919; telegram from Premier, Tasmania to Acting PM, 16 August, 1919, AA, series A2, item 1919/2959.
- 47 Cumpston, 1919, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine*, pp 69-70.
- 48 *Report of the Director-General of Public Health, New South Wales, for the year 1919, including a Report on the Influenza Epidemic, 1919*, p 162, in *NSWPP*, 1920, Vol 1 (Armstrong wrote Part I of

- the report on influenza: 'Epidemiology and Administration'.)
- 49 Armstrong, loc. cit., p 161; Cumpston, JHL, 1989, *Health and Disease in Australia: a History*, intro, M Lewis, ed, AGPS, Canberra, p 319.
- 50 Controller of Shipping to Secretary to Acting PM, 22 March 1919, AA, series A2, item 19/1922
- 51 *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia...1901-1919*, No 13, 1920, Government Printer, Melbourne, p 1129. In the midst of rural NSW, the Federal Territory's low rate of 43 per 100,000 reflects only one death in a small and scattered population. In the Northern Territory, infected last of all, an extreme rate of 333 per 100,000 reflected 16 deaths in a scattered population, and perhaps for some their remoteness from medical aid.
- 52 Woodruff P, 1984, *Two Million South Australians*, Peacock Publications, Adelaide, pp 60-61, 64, 71.
- 53 McQueen, 1976, The 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic, p 135.
- 54 McQueen, 1976, The 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic, p 134.