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### Deadlier than a Disease: The Pandemic(s) of Misinformation

Living in a time with the gift of hindsight to historical pasts, it is quite difficult to feel a close connection to the last time it felt like the world was on fire – 1918. With the advent of electricity, the waging of a world war, and the existence of a deadly virus prior to hand hygiene practices, you can say those guys had it much harder. Though if you look beyond the commonalities between COVID-19 and the Spanish Flu, things aren't so different. Over a century later, our society continues to grapple with the question of authority: whether it's the "fake news" of today or the cure-all patent medicines of the past, we have grown a critical eye to the spread of misinformation. Published on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1919, Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams wrote a piece on the do's and don'ts regarding the Spanish Flu for his weekly column on *The Chicago Defender*.

As a part of Chicago's leading Black news publication, Dr. A. W. Williams was "the first African American physician to write a newspaper column on health" (Encyclopedia.com). In this piece, he denounced the influence of "Christian scientists" by denying their insistence that fear was "at the bottom of the chain of infection"

(Williams, 1919). Dr. Williams then condemned three “remedies” travelling through social circles: Lord's prayer, the whiskey cure, and the tar cure (in which one downs a plentiful serving of boiled pine tar). Today, the public continues to look to figures of authority in how they grapple with life-threatening disease (among other things). In a similar fashion to Williams’ acts of denouncement, Seattle NPR-affiliate KUOW made a decision in March 2020 to no longer air live White House briefings on the coronavirus due to “the potential impact of false information on the health and safety of our community” brought on by Donald Trump (KUOW, 2020). As shown by Dr. Williams, the questioning of sources and quality of information is nothing new to our generation.

Dr. Williams continued his piece with an honest tone, clarifying that a cure for the Spanish Flu was not known at the time, however he noted a general reliability in white blood cell counts by saying “If the fighting elements of the blood keep up or show an increase of resistance, the outlook is good” (Williams, 1919). His scientific writing catered to the non-medically trained masses compares to the “sudden” popularization of scientific language in the wake of COVID-19. Similarly, Google Trends points to a spike in searches for “Antibody Test” in late April, 2020.

Though the world that Dr. A. W. Williams’ experienced in 1918 is much different than the one I am experiencing in 2020, I find comfort in knowing that the human spirit has one constant: the ability to learn from, but more importantly, question authority.

## Works Cited

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# DR. A. WILBERFORCE WILLIAMS

## TALKS ON PREVENTIVE MEASURES, FIRST AID REMEDIES HYGIENICS AND SANITATION

No Cases Are Diagnosed and No Prescriptions Given in These Weekly Articles

### INFLUENZA—NOT DUE TO FEAR— VARIOUS CURES

Many of the poorly informed are circulating the pernicious doctrine that "Influenza, or what is commonly known as Spanish Influenza, is a disease that is due to fear". This is a dangerous doctrine, misleading and fraught with great danger. Take for instance, the soldiers who braved the canons, the machine guns—who "went over the top"—many of them lost their lives in "going over the top." Does any sane person believe that they were filled with fear? And yet, tens of thousands of these brave boys died with influenza; they were surrounded with the best hygienic and sanitary conditions in the various Base Hospitals and given the best possible medical care and nursing. And yet they died. And when you consider that during the recent pandemic, although the raging of this disease was of short period, six million of people died of influenza; five hundred thousand, or half a million, died in these United States, our own country. Are you gullible enough to believe that this great mortality rate is due to fear, when you consider the most robust, the healthiest and the best cared for members of the human family died so rapidly—victims of this disease? Many Christian Scientists have been strong in their advocacy of the fact that fear is at the bottom of all influenzal diseases. Now, we have no quarrel with the Christian Scientists. During the eight years we have been trying to educate the public along the line of hygiene and sanitation, better housing conditions and right living, we have never said one word disparaging of the teaching of the Christian Scientist. We do know that in many cases of nervous and mental derangement, where there is no structural or organic derangement, that Christian Science has been able to do good in comforting people, in teaching self-control—in easing the mind, in giving hope and optimism to many discouraged and despondent persons. That is why we say we have no quarrel with Christian Scientists; but, the facts adduced do not support the proposition that Spanish influenza, or influenza, la grippe or epidemic bronchial pneumonia, is due or that at the bottom of the chain of infection is "fear." According to the Christian Scientists the moment we divest ourselves of fear that moment influenza would be banished from the earth. And yet, as said above, many of our soldiers went "over the top"—shot with bullets or killed by influenza and never at any time gave any demonstration of "fear."



Dr. A. W. Williams

Definition of Influenza  
Allow us to quote the definition of influenza from a very reliable medical dictionary. It is as follows: "Influenza, an epidemic disease, marked by depression, distressing fever, acute catarrhal infection of nose, larynx and bronchi, and neuralgic and muscular pains. The disease is due to the bacillus influenza, and its duration is from a few days to one or two weeks; relapses frequently occur, the patient being left weak for a long time and subject to colds, etc.; complications are frequent, the chief one being pneumonia and various affections of the eye, ear, etc. The disease is also known as la grippe and grip. Influenza (Ital. means influence). (French meaning, seize or grip as in a vise.)" Strange indeed would it be, if fear induces or brings about this awful train of physical ailments. Following influenza is often a harassing cough—its victims are weak and very susceptible to colds and affections of the respiratory tract. We have been advising people for the last few months, to rest, surround themselves with the best hygiene and sanitary conditions; and that the real cause of this present epidemic—that the real cure has baffled and is baffling the most learned in the medical profession. It seems to make no difference what line of treatment is followed, many die. The best indication that one is putting up a good fight and on the road to recovery is shown by the blood; hence, it is well to make frequent blood examinations or blood counts. If the fighting elements of the blood keep up or show an increase of resistance, the outlook is good. If the fighting elements show a decrease or

lessening of resistance, the indications are that approaching death is sure.

### The Various Cures

Among the various cures advocated by the laity, there are many ridiculous and nonsensical remedies.

**The Tar Cure.** One lady advocates the drinking of pure pine tar. She advises you to put the tar in a kettle and pour water over it and let it boil; then pour it into a stone jar and let it stand. You are to drink this yellow tar water and it will cure you of influenza or any other disease. She advocates the drinking of this tar water frequently and plentifully.

**The Bible and Lord's Prayer.** This may be good. Another lady advises that the Bible be read and the Lord's Prayer be said each and every morning in our public schools and in other places of public assemblage, stating that this will keep away the dreaded disease.

Another poor deluded victim advocates the taking of plenty of peroxide of hydrogen—she states it will prevent and cure influenza—it will not only prevent and cure influenza but stamp it out. Still another enthusiast advises and states as an evidence that he went through the worst part of the recent epidemic of influenza by wearing asafetida around his neck, and rubbing his feet night and morning with sulphur. He also wore some sulphur in his shoes. Thus protected with asafetida and sulphur he mingled with people night and day that had the disease and he knows that his life was saved by the use of the asafetida and sulphur.

**Drinking of Whisky.** Letters have been piling into our office for weeks and months advocating the use of plenty of whisky as a "sure cure" for influenza. "Drink good whisky if you can, but by all means keep your system full of whisky and keep away the flu." This has long been exploded. The best medical authorities will tell you that an habitual whisky drinker comes down quicker with pneumonia, tuberculosis and any respiratory disease, and that he succumbs much quicker than those who are not habitual users of alcoholic beverages. One should never take alcoholic beverages, such as whisky, beer, gin or rum, not even brandy, into his system except upon the advice of a careful, experienced physician.

### The Real Cure Not Known

The medical profession so far has been groping in the dark, research being made every day for the purpose of finding the real cure. We have learned that a strict observing of the laws of hygiene, sanitation and right living go far in preventing and protecting one against this awful plague. Influenza, pneumonia and various respiratory diseases are very prevalent, and will continue to be until late in the spring. Therefore, we advise our readers to stay away from public gatherings, except when absolutely necessary—to stay as far from people who are coughing and sneezing as you possibly can. Do not visit the sick any more than you can possibly help. Do not drink from cups, common drinking cups, dippers, etc., the common towel below par. And when you are in a public place, go for three or four days for the reason related. Influenza are very frequent, hence, very weak people have been known to die suddenly when getting influenza and apparently in a condition. The wise will be for several weeks and months recovery from this disease.