

EDITOR'S NOTE

I don't know if you, our readers, have had the same experience, but lately I've found it upsetting to read the newspaper every day. Between one sip of coffee and the next, I am submerged in news of crimes, corruption, and hypocrisy, tossed together with the bluster of boring, ephemeral celebrities. My cup sometimes remains suspended mid-air while I gape at scenes of hair-raising disasters. And when I step out into another sunny, blue-skied day in my neighborhood of Santa Teresa, heading off to work, I find my pupils constricting in reaction to Rio's awesome outpouring of light and my heart oppressed in knowing how fragile this sense of 'normality' we attach to our everyday lives.

When we least expect it, our daily routine can be shattered by events that have dramatic repercussions on our personal lives or on the destiny of entire communities or nations. This is what happened in late 1918, when the flu epidemic swept through Europe, adding more corpses to the slaughter of World War I, from there moving on to kill thousands in other continents.

This issue of *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* brings you three articles on how this pandemic impacted Brazil, more specifically, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. Brazilian historiography has paid scant attention to this flu epidemic as compared to other topics, so it is no exaggeration to say that these articles make a substantial contribution to our understanding of an issue still relevant today.

But don't think I'm writing these words in an effort to hawk our magazine. I imagine your attention has also been caught by the news stories appearing with worrisome frequency alongside reports on wars and crimes, tsunamis and earthquakes. "WHO says flu pandemic imminent" read a headline in the 24 February 2005 edition of a Rio news daily (*O Globo*, p. 32). A few weeks earlier, the same paper had warned us that "the Asian virus is twice as deadly as smallpox" (1 February 2005, p. 28). *O Globo* cited scientists from Thailand, the United States, and the World Health Organization, who advise that "we need to adopt preventive measures while the storm is still brewing."

During the time our staff was putting together the current issue of *Manguinhos*, the local press was packed with stories on the healthcare crisis in Rio de Janeiro, and between one sip of coffee and another, I struggled to digest reports on the outrages committed by all those who have no qualms about sacrificing human lives to the benefit of their self-serving political ambitions.

Can you imagine the repercussions in our city of another Spanish flu epidemic today, tomorrow, or the day after? Would it be anything like the threat hanging over our heads? What measures have the federal, state, and municipal authorities taken, during lulls between their frenzied media appearances? Are they hoping for one more headline-making crisis that will somehow defeat their adversaries?

In the midst of these concerns, we decided to invite into our pages not some blathering hot-shot but rather one of those selfless individuals who quietly places the best of her heart and mind at the service of others. The enlightening interview with virologist Marilda Mendonça Siqueira, of Fiocruz's Laboratory of Respiratory Viruses and Measles, points us in the right direction: we need to gain a better understanding of the past; we must think harder about the present and act on it conscientiously; and we can take comfort in the certainty that good, decent people are working in the shadows of this sinister mayhem we are forced to imbibe every day.

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Editor