The centennial of a devastating outbreak

One hundred years ago this month, the “mother of all pandemics” was sweeping the world. The flu pandemic was caused by an airborne H1N1 avian virus and killed an estimated 1% to 2% of the world’s population in 1918 and 1919. The victims were primarily young and often healthy adults. The pandemic struck during World War I, killing more than the 17 million who died in that conflict; it is still considered one of the deadliest disease outbreaks in recorded history. The 1918 pandemic came to be dubbed the Spanish flu not because it originated there but because Spain was neutral in the war and so reported freely on the outbreak. The U.S. and other countries at war suppressed information about the severity of the disease so as not to damage morale.

April 5, 1918
Weekly public health report tells of first U.S. flu fatalities with three deaths in Haskell, Kan.

100,000 to 195,000
Number of U.S. deaths in October 1918 alone during the deadly second wave of the pandemic, which hit from September through November, beginning in the Boston area

675,000
Number of deaths in the U.S. attributed to the pandemic

40%
Decline in shipyard productivity reported in New York City due to flu illnesses in the midst of World War I

12 years
The number of years that life expectancy in the U.S. had fallen by 1919 because of the pandemic, to 36.6 years for men and 42.2 years for women

500 million
The number of people worldwide who became infected with the virus, about one-third of the world’s population

50 million
Number of deaths worldwide attributed to the pandemic

Zero
Number of laboratory tests to diagnose, detect or characterize the flu in 1918

2005
The year CDC researchers were able to physically reconstruct the 1918 pandemic virus with reverse genetics. They found the HA and PB1 virus genes made for “maximum replication and virulence”

—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; numbers for deaths and infections are only estimates but are based on CDC research.