

Pandemic, Creating a Usable Past: *Epidemic History, COVID-19, and the Future of Health*

Sponsored by the [American Association for the History of Medicine](#) (with support from [Princeton University, Department of History](#))

In the face of COVID-19, historians of public health, nursing, and medicine come together to reflect on past epidemics and their implications for how we confront today's unfolding crisis. Those who study epidemics and pandemics in the past see powerful echoes in the present crisis. In the past as today, families and societies grappled with the sudden tragic loss of life. They debated the social and economic fallout from the epidemic. They struggled with tensions over the halting of commerce, the imposition of quarantines, and social distancing measures. They fought over the impact of public health measures on personal freedom and civil liberties. They tried to make sense of the different impact of disease across regions and populations, well-off and poor. They sought cures and prevention measures, even as dubious theories and fraudulent practices sprung up. They argued over what forms of knowledge or faith would guide them through the calamity. They called for reinventing public health during the crisis, and for rethinking social priorities once the epidemic subsided. And, even as the toll of death widened, they planned for the uncertain future.

With history as our guide, this forum of epidemic experts explores how people and societies in former eras responded to pandemic challenges. What perspective does their experience offer for the present? What guidance does the past provide for the future of public health, health care, and public policy?

Organizer: [Keith Wailoo, Princeton University](#)

Friday, May 8 – Day One

9 am | Introduction and Welcome [Keith Wailoo, Princeton University](#)

9:15 - 10:30 am | Session 1 | Explaining Epidemics: The Past in the Present

Decades ago, in the early days of the AIDS crisis, historian Charles Rosenberg wrote “epidemics start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, following a plot line of increasing revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure.” In the course of epidemics, societies grappled with sudden and unexpected mortality and also returned to fundamental questions about core social values. “Epidemics,” Rosenberg wrote, “have always provided occasion for retrospective moral judgment.” (“What is an Epidemic?”) This introductory panel features a discussion on these and other features of past epidemics – cholera, AIDS, plague, influenza, and so on – and their implications for understanding the unfolding COVID-19 crisis.

Moderator: [Keith Wailoo, Princeton University](#)

Discussants:

[Nancy Tomes, Stony Brook University](#)

[Charles Rosenberg, Harvard University](#)

11 am - 12:30 pm | Session 2 | Epidemics and Urban Centers: Different Cities, Disparate Experiences

Pandemics are often disparate in their impact – devastating some areas while sparing others, affecting regions and countries differently, and revealing shocking divergences along lines of social density, geography, class, and ethnicity. Public responses and public health measures can also accentuate these differences. What light do past experiences with influenza, Ebola, and other epidemics shed on our understanding of the forces driving these different experiences across urban centers and the geopolitics of epidemics? How can this history inform responses to COVID-19?

Moderator: [Pablo Gómez, University of Wisconsin, Madison](#)

Presenters:

[Howard Markel, physician/historian, University of Michigan](#) | *Social Distancing/Urban*

[Evelynn Hammonds, Harvard University](#) | *On the Racial Effects of Epidemics*

[Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, Columbia University](#) | *Local and Global Effects*

[Gregg Mitman, University of Wisconsin, Madison](#) | *The Geopolitics of Ebola and COVID-19*

1 - 3:30 pm | Session 3 | Battling Epidemics: Historian/Health Care Practitioners Reflect on their Experiences on the Front Lines of Care

What are the experiences of practitioners on the front lines of care? This panel of historian/physicians and historians/nurses from across the U.S. offers insight into patient experiences, professional risks, triage challenges, therapeutic choices, innovative practices, and downstream effects associated with the COVID-19 crisis. As historians of medicine and nursing, panelists will also put their frontline experiences into historical perspective and discuss the long-term implications of COVID-19 on health care and society.

Moderator: [Dominique Tobbell, University of Minnesota](#)

Presenters:

[Barron Lerner, physician/historian New York University](#) | *Trust, Expertise, and History*

[Carla Keirns, physician/historian, University of Kansas](#) | *Medical Ethics/Front line Care*

[Julie Fairman, nurse/historian, University of Pennsylvania](#) | *COVID-19 Through the Lens of Nursing*

[Chris Crenner, physician/historian, University of Kansas](#) | *The Challenge of Triage*
[Hughes Evans, physician/historian, Emory University](#) | *Downstream Effects in Pediatrics*
[Jeremy Greene, physician/historian, Johns Hopkins](#) | *The Past, Present, and Future of Tele-health*

Saturday, May 9 – Day Two

9 - 10:30 am | Session 4 | Epidemic Responses: Civil Liberties and Public Health Politics

In the face of epidemic outbreaks, public health demands (whether for the wearing of masks, stay-at-home orders, quarantine and curfews, no-spitting ordinances, or mandatory testing) have often sacrificed individual freedoms in order to safeguard public wellbeing. But in the past, as today, controversies have flared over those demands and their lasting consequences. What implications have pandemics and crises in the past, and responses to them, had for civil liberties? How can the past inform the present response to COVID-19?

Moderator: [Raúl Necochea, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill](#)

Presenters:

[Barron Lerner, New York University](#) | *Pandemics and Civil Liberties* [Richard Mizelle, University of Houston](#) | *Black Lives in the Wake of Calamity* [David Barnes, University of Pennsylvania](#) | *Quarantine: Lessons from the Lazaretto*

11 am - 12:30 pm | Session 5 | Uncertain Knowledge in Epidemics: How Crises Spur New Therapies, Surveillance Practices, and Dubious Theories

In the face of epidemic illness and sweeping death and with few effective treatments, social and medical experimentation thrives. In past outbreaks, new therapies, new vaccines, new surveillance practices, and new theories about bodies and difference have flourished – some effective and lasting, others dubious and destructive. What light does this history of uncertain knowledge shed on our today's COVID-19 experience? How can history inform public understanding of the quest for solutions on the road ahead?

Moderator: [Carin Berkowitz, New Jersey Council of the Humanities](#)

Presenters:

[Mariola Espinosa, University of Iowa](#) | *Theories of Race, Immunity, Yellow Fever*
[Emily Waples, Hiram College](#) | *Meaning and Politics of Symptoms in the 19th Century and Today*
[Graham Mooney, Johns Hopkins University](#) | *Infectious Disease Surveillance, 19th Century Origins and Legacy*
[Susan Lederer, University of Wisconsin, Madison](#) | *Convalescent Serum Therapy: Past and Present*

1:30 – 3 pm | Session 6 | After Epidemics: The Challenge of Reinventing Public Health

From cholera to polio and AIDS, epidemic crises often spur societies to reinvent public health. How have societies in the past retooled public health practices and administration after epidemics? What implications might we draw for the remaking of national and global public health in the wake of the 2020 coronavirus?

Moderator: [Keith Wailoo, Princeton University](#)

Presenters:

[Anne-Emanuelle Birn, University of Toronto](#) | *The Pasts and Possible Futures of Global Public Health*

[Akwasi Kwarteng Amoaka-Gyampah, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana](#) | *Past and Future of Sanitary Inspection*

[Dora Vargha, University of Exeter](#) | *Polio and Global Health Politics*

[Nancy Tomes, Stony Brook University](#) | *Informing and Misinforming the Public*

3 - 3:30 pm | Closing discussion with panelists

Moderator: [Keith Wailoo, Princeton University](#)

Presenters:

[William Schneider, Indiana University](#) | *Why Some Pathogens Become Pandemics – Lessons from HIV/AIDS*

[Jacob Steere-Williams, College of Charleston](#) | *Disinfectants, Xenophobia, and Mistrust in the Face of Pandemics*

[Ruth Rogaski, Vanderbilt University](#) | *The Fraught Historical Legacies of Epidemics in East Asia – From Yersinia pestis to Coronavirus*

[Mical Raz, University of Rochester](#) | *COVID-19 – History and Health Policy Lessons*