Quarantine & Infection Control: From the ‘Black Death’ to the 21st Century

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The English word quarantine is derived from the Latin: *quadraginta*, and the Italian: *quaranta*, both meaning 40. A period of 40 days quarantine stems from the mid 1300s, when the Bubonic Plague, the “Black Death,” swept across Europe. Laws were imposed by cities in Italy and Croatia which issued 30-day periods of quarantine, and later 40 days, to ships arriving from plague-infected areas, and which were suspected of harboring contagious crews and passengers, or foods and livestock.

In the United States, the first quarantine station and hospital was built in Philadelphia in 1799. The Port of Providence issued regulations for quarantining ships from foreign countries in the mid 1800s. In 1844, the City of Providence instructed DR. JOHN W. RICHMOND, its health officer, pursuant to regulations established by the city in 1834, to be the first to board a vessel arriving at its port to “present the quarantine regulations to the master or commanding officer and examine every person on board to ascertain the true state of their health and the vessel and give directions for cleansing the same.” Clothing, sails, bedding were to be “sunk or buried” if the physician determined them to be dangerous. [Figure 1, next page]

Continuous outbreaks of infectious diseases in the United States resulted in the passage of the National Quarantine Act in 1878. [Figure 2]

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, city and state Departments of Health posted signs on homes and theaters, in an effort to contain the spread of smallpox, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, and tuberculosis, to name a few. [Figures 3 and 4].

Today, U.S. Quarantine Stations are located at 20 ports of entry and land-border crossings where most international travelers arrive. They are staffed with medical and public health officers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and managed by CDC’s Division of Global Migration and Quarantine (DGMQ), the latter currently staffs 18 of CDC’s 20 quarantine stations. Dallas and Boston fall under the jurisdiction of the quarantine stations in Houston and New York respectively, according to the CDC website, cdc.gov.

Figure 2. [CREDIT: CDC]

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<th>Brief U.S. Quarantine History</th>
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<td>1799</td>
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Figures 3 and 4. Signs such as these appeared on the doorways of US homes in the first half of the 20th century. [CREDIT: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE]
AN ORDNANCE RESPECTING QUARANTINE.

WHEREAS, in the opinion of the City Council of the city of Providence, that the preservation of the health of the people of said city and the public is dependent upon the health of the persons who may enter the same; and for that end, necessary means being at hand to encircle the same, it is expedient to prevent persons from suffering from the effects of pestilence, as far as may be consistent with the provisions of the law, and to that end, necessary means to be had, it is expedient to ordain and establish the following ordinance.

Sec. 1. It is hereby ordained that the following persons shall not enter such city, town or village, nor any part thereof, unless they shall have consented so to do in writing to the City Council, or its agent in writing, and shall have presented to such City Council, or its agent, a certificate of health, which shall be signed by the officer of health of the city, town or village, from which they may have come, or by some officer of health, or by some person of good character, or by some physician, registered in the City Council of said city, who shall have treated such person for the disease or complaint from which such person may suffer, and who shall state in writing, that such person is free from any conta...

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Figure 1.
1918–1919/The Spanish Flu

1918: Rush on a germicide station during the Great Influenza scare. The political cartoon is signed by the artist, Chas Reese, and dated 1919. Men are rushing to the door and climbing in the window, trying to get some of the bottled drink/medicine. The winding road leading to the building shows people running and driving in cars towards the building. The men are dressed in suits and have the names of the people they are intended to represent, probably people in politics or journalism.

[Library of Congress/Red Cross and Medical History Collection Image 14-74606]

1918: Providence, RI

In the fall of 1918, Brown University placed a quarantine on its students, placing guards at the college gates. The quarantine remained in effect for four weeks, with few students becoming ill and no deaths. Private and public schools in Providence were also shuttered, until the flu subsided in late fall.


1918: Seattle, WA

Precautions taken in Seattle during the Spanish Influenza epidemic would not permit anyone to ride on the streetcars without wearing a mask. 260,000 of these were made by the Seattle Chapter of the Red Cross, which consisted of 120 workers, in three days.

[Library of Congress/Red Cross and Medical History Collection Image 14-74606]
NEW HAVEN, CT, circa 1918–1919
Interior of Red Cross House at U.S. General Hospital #16, New Haven, CT, during the influenza epidemic. The beds are isolated by curtains. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/AMERICAN RED CROSS]

ELLIS ISLAND, NY, circa 1930
A man in pajamas and a robe is sitting and reading a newspaper behind a caged door in quarantine detention at Ellis Island, New York City. [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE]

NEW YORK CITY, LA GUARDIA AIRPORT, 1947
Passengers from London entering the quarantine room at La Guardia Airport in New York City. [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE]

 PROVIDENCE, RI, 1962
A teacher oversees children in a day nursery in Providence who are lining up to wash their hands to prevent the spread of germs. Fortunately for these youngsters, the Salk vaccine to prevent polio, approved in 1955, was widely available by then. [RI DIGITAL ARCHIVES, SECRETARY OF STATE’S OFFICE, DEPT. OF HEALTH PHOTOGRAPHS]
USNS MERCY (T-AH 19), MARCH 2020

(Below) The Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) navigates the San Diego channel, March 23, 2020. Mercy deployed in support of the nation’s COVID-19 response efforts, and will serve as a referral hospital for non-COVID-19 patients currently admitted to shore-based hospitals. This allows shore base hospitals to focus their efforts on COVID-19 cases. One of the Department of Defense’s missions is Defense Support of Civil Authorities. DOD is supporting the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the lead federal agency, as well as state, local and public health authorities in helping protect the health and safety of the American people.

[U.S. NAVY PHOTO BY MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 3RD CLASS LASHHEBA JAMES]

(Right) Capt. John Rotruck, commanding officer of the Mercy, speaks to members of the press just before the ship’s departure.

[MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS NATALIE M. BYERS]