

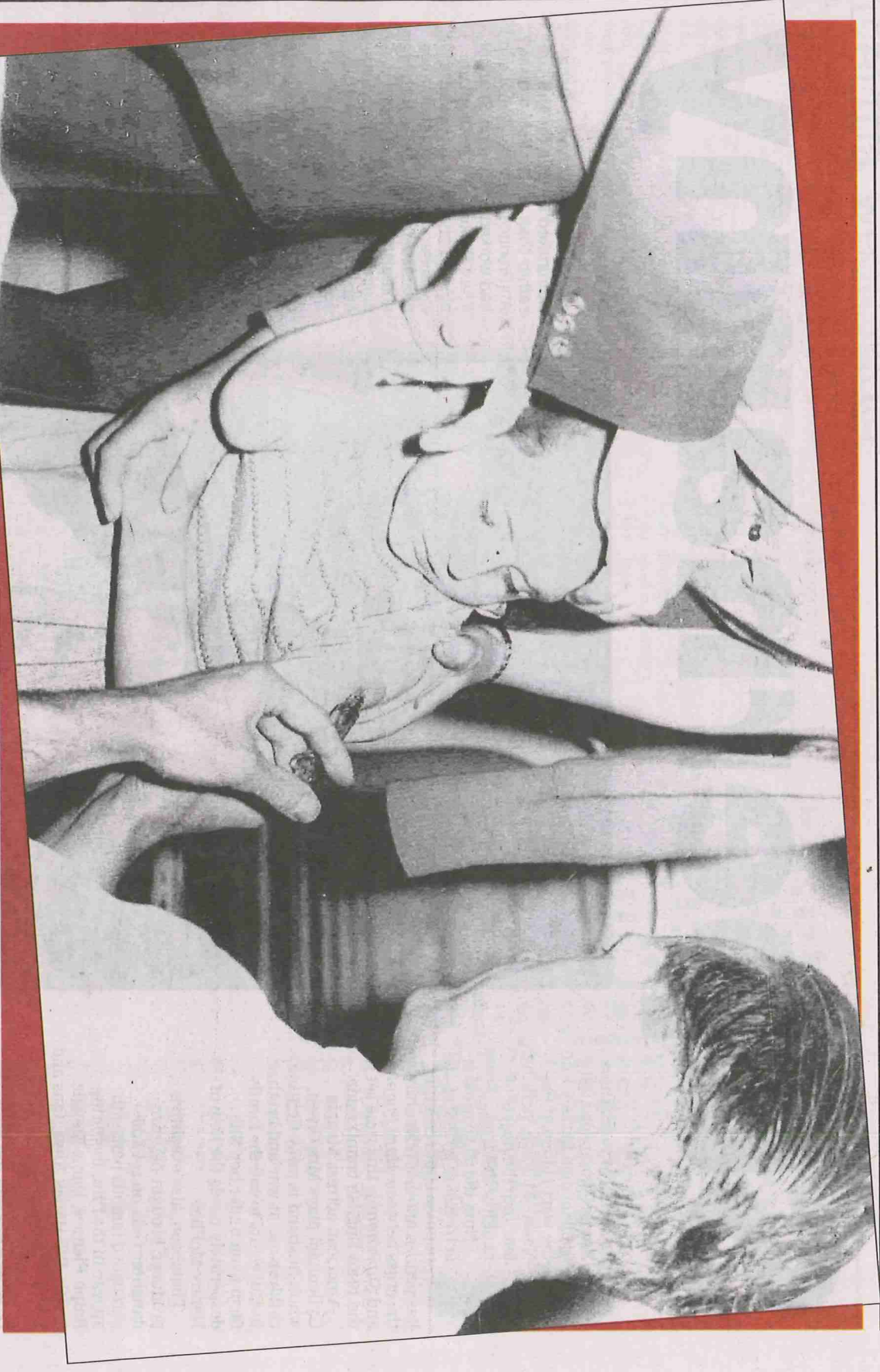
at the
archives
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What you
should
know

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PANDEMIC

Deadly flu outbreak hit Wagga in 1919

Few few years we are in the grip of terror over an outbreak of a potential pandemic, the latest being the H1N1 virus, or "swine flu". Each time, we expect our doctors will be able to provide some form of cure and we expect our scientists to already have a vaccine on the way and that life will soon go

back to normal. We have such confidence in our control over medicine that when we hear that someone has died of such an illness, disbelief and shock are our response.

But not so long ago, included in that response would have been resignation – resignation that death is just a part of sickness.

One of the more memorable pandemics to have hit Australia was the Spanish flu in 1919. The first cases were reported during the middle of 1918, mostly in the United States and Europe.

By November 1918, *The Daily Advertiser* was reporting that influenza was "raging all over the world".

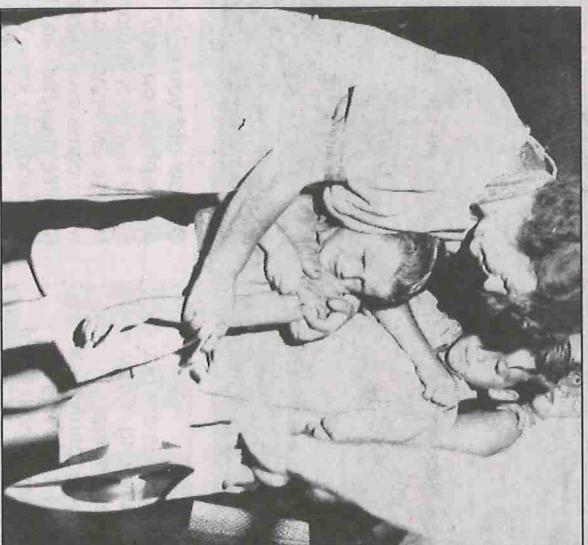
A significant factor in the effective spread of the influenza virus was the thousands of soldiers returning home from Europe after World War I. Because of Australia's natural isolation from the rest of the world, authorities were forewarned of the virus' spread and so were able to implement a number of quarantine measures to impede the spread.

Regardless, the flu managed to penetrate the quarantine defences and so was first reported in Melbourne during January 1919. More cases were quickly discovered, signalling the virus was travelling inland.

This resulted in more quarantine defences being imposed, one being special constables guarding the state border on the Murray.

Inoculation depots were also opened around the country to immunise the population, though a high percentage did not take advantage of the opportunity.

The first case of influenza appeared in Wagga



Children receiving vaccinations during public immunisation programs in the 1950s and 1960s. Pictures: Tom Lennon Collection

on February 20, 1919.

Twenty-five-year-old William Tyrie of Yerong Creek became sick and had travelled to town to see a doctor.

The three men who had been sharing a tent with Tyrie at Yerong Creek also became sick and were brought to Wagga the next day.

Though many precautions had been taken, the influenza soon spread to Wagga itself, with the first two cases being reported in *The Daily Advertiser* on March 29.

A week later, there were 12 cases in the Wagga District Hospital and 60 known contacts in isolation.

On April 17, the South Wagga Public School was opened as a convalescent hospital, run by the Voluntary Aid Corp, to relieve the overstretched hospital which at that point was caring for 56 patients.

The health inspector reported mid-July that

320 cases of influenza had been registered within the municipality and that 32 people had died.

In order to effectively impose quarantines the authorities had ensured those people who were possibly infected were isolated in their homes and placed yellow flags outside to notify the public.

Large gatherings of people were restricted to the point where many schools were closed, as well as "places of inside amusement," some businesses, and even churches were recommended to be closed.

The public was required to wear masks when in the company of others by law and were liable to be fined if they did not comply.

The crisis had died down in Wagga by the end of July.

Official restrictions were lifted, though the public were cautioned against too-close contact with others, and organised dances especially were frowned upon.

While the Spanish flu is considered to be the most deadliest virus in human history, the experience was not an uncommon one for the time.

Unsanitary conditions, coupled with rising populations, meant epidemics of diseases such as smallpox, typhoid, diphtheria, influenza, scarlet fever, and tuberculosis were common occurrences in the 1800s.

Louis Pasteur's germ theory experiments only managed to convince doctors of the wisdom of sanitation during the late 19th century.

In addition, immunisation, while long being known as an effective preventative to disease, was not able to be widely utilised until the mid-1800s, when the smallpox vaccine was developed in England and babies were required to be immunised.

It was only during the early 20th century when vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough) and tuberculosis were made widely available through official government-run schemes in an attempt to wipe out such diseases.

References: *The Daily Advertiser* – 18/11/1918, 25/01/1919, 17/02/1919, 29/03/1919, 07/04/1919, 08/04/1919, 17/04/1919, 18/07/1919.