

Pioneering UMHB physician dealt with earlier pandemic

July 23, 2021

BELTON—COVID-19 wasn't the first pandemic to lock down the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor campus and to prompt safety precautions, such as wearing masks and social distancing.

An earlier epidemic—commonly known as the Spanish flu—swept through campus almost exactly 102 years ago to the day the COVID-19 virus shut down campus in March 2020.

At what was then called the Baylor College for Women, campus enrollment numbered about 600. In the time span of about three months, more than 400 of those students, plus 50 faculty and staff, contracted the deadly disease that was wiping out millions worldwide.

No fatalities in the campus community

Thanks to the revolutionary efforts of Dr. Jacob Moore “J.M.” Frazier, not a single student or teacher died during the horrific epidemic thought to have killed upwards of 50 million people worldwide.

“From a statistical standpoint, mortality rates for Spanish flu were in excess of 2.5 percent. With that in mind, we would expect to see at least 10 to 12 deaths based on the number of cases on campus,” said Blaine French, an assistant professor in the physician assistant program.

“To put it in perspective, the city of Temple simply stopped counting fatalities but reported they had to purchase 1.5 additional acres (to accommodate all the burials). God has an amazing way of showing his

grace, and I think that sparing the students and faculty at UMHB was a clear sign of that.”

Frazier was the campus physician and a professor at Baylor College for Women for 40 years. On Sept. 26, 1918, he diagnosed the first two women to bring the virus to campus, according to his autobiography, *From Tallow Candle to Television: An Autobiography of Dr. J.M. Frazier*.

The first strain hit in March of that year but wasn't particularly deadly. The second wave came in the fall and hit with a vengeance. The first two students to contract the virus lived in separate residence halls on campus, and before Dec. 4, the flu had spread to more than 450 students and teachers.

Even though 19 of his patients developed pneumonia and one or two had pleurisy, Frazier wrote he “counted it a blessing to report that I had not a single fatality.”

“My success under Providence lay in the fact that I had absolute control of the situation,” he wrote. “We removed every girl from the dormitory on a stretcher and rigidly enforced a recumbent position until the temperature was normal for 48 hours. Liquid nourishment, lots of fluids, lemonade, water, and buttermilk, after the preliminary mild purgative, usually castor oil, composed each patient's diet.”

Treatment and prevention emphasized

Pneumonia cases were treated in well-ventilated rooms with even temperatures inside Luther Hall. Patients were well-fed and kept under rigid care for a week after the crisis. No patient was discharged until she or he had a normal pulse, temperature and respiration.

Like COVID-19, Frazier wrote that the worst feature of Spanish flu was its

“extreme infectiousness.”

“Every nurse (16 of them), every nurse’s aide (student volunteers), and every patient or friend who hovered over a sickbed came down with the ‘flu’ as it soon came to be called,” he wrote.

In the first week of September, Texas newspapers reported an epidemic was likely. By the third week of that month, Belton and Temple health officers began ordering school, church and store closures, and theater performances and sporting and social events were canceled.

By mid-October, newspaper articles said Bell County was in a “deep crisis,” and every precaution was being taken to get it under control.

Even though projections in most of Bell County were bleak, Frazier managed to keep things under control at the college.

French noted there were few diagnostic tools or treatment options for the sick in 1918.

“Penicillin wasn’t discovered until 1928, and lab testing was limited,” he said. “Dr. Frazier was largely restricted to what he could see or hear on a physical exam and managing symptoms.”

Frazier was captivated by the relatively new field of “preventive medicine” and taught his students about anatomy, physiology and hygiene.

“He didn’t see patients just for illnesses,” French said. “He believed so much in preventative medicine, he didn’t bill them at all. He very much believed that an ‘ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.’”

Frazier’s efforts may have helped pave the way for the monumental gains researchers and physicians have made in preventative medicine. French said those gains include regular vaccinations for many childhood illnesses, which previously resulted in significant injury or death for a large portion

of the population.

Dealt with four epidemics in 40 years

Frazier, who lived to be 85, grew up in Central Texas and graduated in 1876 from Waco University—which later consolidated with Baylor University—with a bachelor’s degree before heading to the University of Pennsylvania to earn his medical degree.



Dr. J.M. Frazier was campus physician and professor at the Baylor College for Women for 40 years. (UMHB Photo)

Working at Presbyterian Hospital, he was assigned as an “assistant physician to the poor.” As a young physician, Frazier recalled what he described as his “baptism of fire” when he had to handle his first serious epidemic—a scarlet fever outbreak.

Frazier moved to Belton in 1894 when he took the position of college physician and professor. He also had a private medical practice in town. Frazier had three sons and four daughters, and all of his daughters graduated from Baylor College for Women.

His bout with scarlet fever in Pennsylvania proved to be the first of many epidemics he encountered during his career as a physician. In fact, during his 40 years of health supervision at UMHB, he experienced four serious epidemics.

The first was an outbreak of typhoid fever, which occurred soon after he arrived in Belton. From October to December, 37 cases developed, some

very serious with intestinal hemorrhaging and other complications.

While three rooms on the third floor of Luther Hall were set aside for sick girls with the dormitory mother acting as nurse, Frazier continued to search the campus for the infection source. He finally discovered a rusted sewage pipe near where the dining hall's milk crocks were aired and dried in the sun. The vessels became contaminated, and all who drank milk were exposed to the disease. Over the Christmas break, workers replaced the pipes, and the ground was disinfected. When the girls returned, not another case developed.

The second sudden and near-tragic epidemic was an outbreak of scarlet fever a few years later. By working all night, Frazier was able to determine seven infected students. He immediately isolated them and closed their dormitory for disinfection.

"Another epidemic was averted," he wrote in his autobiography. "Some of these were very sick girls, but all recovered, and no new cases developed."

The third was the Spanish flu, and the fourth epidemic he recorded on campus was Vincent's Angina, or "trench mouth," as it was nicknamed during World War I. For the first 10 days in June 1921, Frazier treated and isolated 67 cases of trench mouth among the students.

At a medical convention later that year, Frazier shared a paper about his experiences with the disease. A newspaper reporter wrote that "kissing was probably the means for the rapid transmission of the infection," and the story spread through the *United Press*.

Frazier later wrote that he regretted the unsought notoriety he brought upon the student body and added he later determined "much kissing in farewells and greetings was the mode of transmission."

He was also happy to report even though some patients were very sick,

there were no fatalities and no ill effects from the outbreak.

“These epidemics were the highlight, and I had about every form of human ill on the calendar in between,” Frazier wrote. “But fortunately, nothing that common sense and science were not able to handle.”

In a letter written for the Frazier Memorial Health Center building dedication, the unknown author described Frazier as being “born a physician both to the body and to the soul.”

“He had a genuine attitude of non-self-aggrandizement and gratitude, coupled with a humility not often found among men; an insatiable hunger for knowledge, and considered it essential that he study to show thyself approved unto God.”

The letter went on to say Frazier’s close friendship with college administrators and faculty “saw his beloved college through many crises which involved his valued experience, not only in medicine, but in philosophy and psychiatry, and above all his unshaken faith in God and the destiny of the school.”

Adapted from an article that originally appeared in [UMHB Life](#), a publication of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.