



# Media Release



STATE LIBRARY®  
NEW SOUTH WALES

## 14-year-old Balmain boy dies from world's deadliest virus!

4/9/2020

A rare collection of heart-breaking condolence letters from 1919 will go on public display for the first time at the State Library of NSW this week, shedding new light on how people coped with grief and loss during the then world's deadliest pandemic!

According to State Library Senior Curator Elise Edmonds, "The 1919 influenza pandemic claimed more lives than World War 1, yet we know very little about people's experiences during that time, especially when it came to the death of a child!"

The Spanish flu, as it was known, killed more people under 40 – unlike COVID-19 – including 14-year-old Keith Sydney Butler of Balmain, Sydney who died on 9 July 1919.

"There are almost no memorials to those who died in 1919, so the condolence letters and cards sent to Keith's parents and older sister are incredibly valuable and so moving – they show the grief and sadness felt by family unable to attend Keith's funeral and had to mourn from afar said Ms Edmonds.

Family friend Dolly Parry writes on 16 July 1919: "*I am so grieved for you... Poor little kid! I have been ...wondering how things were with you and if you were escaping the epidemic.*"

A selection of the Butler letters will form part of the State Library's new exhibition *PANDEMIC!* - opening Saturday 5 September – which traces the arrival and impact of the Spanish flu in Australia through letters, posters, photographs and WWI diaries.

"As COVID-19 shakes our present, we delve into the year 1919 to uncover uncanny parallels with reports of social distancing, border closures, quarantine blunders, mask wearing and death rates dominating the news – for us this year, the events from 101 years ago are startlingly similar" says Ms Edmonds.

# PANDEMIC!

Images: Men and women wearing face masks in Sydney, 1919 (detail), Wentzell family photograph, A couple walks past the Anzac Memorial in Martin Place, Sydney, 2020 (detail) by John Janson-Moore E&D-5565-9-20



# Media Release



# PANDEMIC!

Images: Men and women wearing face masks in Sydney, 1919 (detail), Wentzell family photograph, A couple walks past the Anzac Memorial in Martin Place, Sydney, 2020 (detail) by John Janson-Moore, E&S-5565-9-20

The exhibition opens with the outbreak of the Spanish flu in Europe in 1918 with first-hand accounts from Australian servicemen and women.

WWI nurse Anne Donnell writes on 14 June 1918: "*Influenza or as the boys say 'The dog's disease' has arrived and is still raging here ... about half the staff and patients must be laid low with it ...*"

Archie Barwick was one of the first Australian soldiers to contract the virus: "*...heavy sweats, bones aching head splitting, & as weak as a kitten a pretty state of affairs... they say I have this 'dog disease' (Spanish flu) in a very bad form & I believe them. (27 June 1918).*"

Other exhibition highlights include:

- SOS card from 1919: people who needed medical or other assistance placed this in their front window and doctors and nurses would arrive on motorcycle and sidecar – recently discovered
- 1919 health guidelines on how to medicate and treat an influenza patient
- 1919 instructions on how to make a mask
- Artist Wendy Sharpe's five-metre long artist book titled *Corona diary*, March–April 2020 – newly acquired
- 'Closed by Corona': a hand-made sign by local Yass artist, displayed in her café window, *Yazzbar* – newly acquired
- Then (1918-19) and now (2020) photographs, including images by award-winning photographers John Janson Moore, Renee Nowytarger and Dean Saffron – newly acquired

*PANDEMIC!* is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW from 5 September to 24 January. The exhibition is supported by a new five-part podcast series – *The Gatherings Order*. Available now on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts and Spotify.

## MEDIA INQUIRIES:

Vanessa Bond, Media & Communications Manager, State Library of NSW  
0411 259 898, [vanessa.bond@sl.nsw.gov.au](mailto:vanessa.bond@sl.nsw.gov.au)

