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Sydney's 1820 influenza outbreak – a detailed analysis of its impact on settler and indigenous populations

When influenza first hit Sydney in 1820, most inhabitants already had been exposed in Britain, while their colonial-born children lacked any antibodies, the colony's remoteness being an effective barrier. Similarly, Aboriginal Australians were also epidemiologically naïve to influenza and lacked even a history of long-term epidemic exposure.

Newspaper accounts of the epidemic outline its course from July to October 1820, affirming its effects on Sydneysiders and indigenous populations. Supplementing this, a previously unexplored resource - the Anglican burial registers for the five parishes of Sydney – open the potential for a much deeper level of interrogation, with novel and significant insights.

The Anglican death registers record 426 deaths across 1820, mainly affecting the youngest and oldest. Because of Sydney's unique circumstances, we know when each of those people was born and when they left Britain, allowing us to predict their exposure to the known pandemic influenza strains that reached Britain in the late 18th century. From this all those deaths can be allocated to three distinct cohorts, plus their 'native-born' children being a fourth. The burial registers allow a detailed analysis of the relative mortality within each cohort from influenza. The key finding is that those who likely exclusively had 1788 Pandemic exposure had a third of others' mortality, strongly suggesting that this strain was the culprit, but took 32 years to reach the antipodes from Europe. The impact on Aboriginal people cannot be quantified, but massive

depopulation is suggested in southeastern Australia and the South Pacific precisely when settler pastoral expansionary pressure was building.

Australia's convict system generated biographically-rich datasets that potentially highlight medico-historical issues from the period before quantification became the norm.