

# THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC OF 1918

*A community pulls together to help the sick and suffering*

Still devastated by loss from the First World War, New Zealanders stepped up to help their neighbours as the deadly new threat swept the country. The only way to avoid catching the virus was by keeping away from other people. There were no flu vaccinations, and no antibiotics.

The war in Europe had claimed many of Aotearoa's trained medical personnel. While the remaining doctors, nurses, chemists, and voluntary organisations such as the Red Cross and St John Ambulance got to work during the pandemic, they were spread very thinly across the country.

Relief efforts relied heavily on volunteers. Many women became lay nurses. Both men and women served on block committees, answering phones or checking on those reported to be ill. Still more people helped their families, friends and neighbours as best they could, particularly where there were young children that needed care. People with vehicles found themselves in particular demand: to take food or medicine to stricken families, to transport the sick or to take away the dead.

The Sisters of Compassion worked alongside other volunteers, nursing sick people in the city's southern and eastern suburbs and also in the temporary hospital set up at St Patrick's College which was then in Buckle Street. The Sisters checked on the residents of the boarding house district around Tory and Haining streets, where the disease was rife.

All the volunteers risked their own lives to help others. Over 700 people in Wellington died during the pandemic. Sr Natalie O'Meara, who was in charge of the Nursery at the Home of Compassion, caught the flu while visiting her brother, Will. She died on 13 December 2018.

Geoffrey W. Rice, "Black November: The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand", 2nd ed, Christchurch NZ: Canterbury University Press, 2005.

# THE INCOMPARABLE SISTERS



Nursing Sisters with Suzanne Aubert, 1908

November 23

"The Sisters of Compassion have been, and are, doing wonderful work. Not only are they nursing at St Patrick's College temporary hospital, but they are visiting the homes of the stricken, nursing, comforting, and consoling the afflicted. This is all in addition to the care of the inmates of the Home for Incurables and the Home of Compassion and as a result of the exertion of the devoted women a number of them have contracted the illness, and are at present laid aside awaiting recovery to again take up their work of charity."

*New Zealand Times* 5 December 1918



compassion *te pūaroa*