

Workshop

How did we lift the burden?

Infectious Disease Mortality in the Western and Non-Western World (1800-now)



28-29 August 2025 at Radboud University



This conference serves as the closing conference of the NWO-funded research project “Lifting the burden of disease”, PI Angelique Janssens, grant number 406.18.HW.011.

Background

The history of infectious disease mortality is far from over, neither in the western world nor the non-western world. Yet, the steep increases in life expectancy since the 19th century in the western world were the result of overcoming (non-)epidemic infectious diseases. These massive reductions of mortality due to diseases such as diphtheria, scarlet fever, tuberculosis and whooping cough, began before the introduction of modern curative medicine after the 1940s. This presents an important explanatory challenge for historians and historical demographers: what drove this important change in mortality and life expectancy and how did it come about? What explanatory factors can help us understand the great leaps forward? In addition, in order to elucidate the driving factors in this process we also need to have a good understanding of the epidemiological profile of the transformation process. Which diseases were driving the decline in mortality, and which diseases were impervious to improvement before the 1940s and how can that be explained? The epidemiological transition was a complex and dynamic process which did not happen everywhere at the same time or in the same way. Time, place and socio-economic dynamics could differ within smaller regions or countries, or for that matter, even within a single city or town. How can we use these characteristics to say anything about the driving forces behind the epidemiological transition? And how did the experiences compare between the frontrunners in the epidemiological transition, such as the Scandinavian countries and England, and those who came later?

Mortality and health are always, not only in the nineteenth century, the outcomes of complex and multi-causal processes. In this historic extension of life expectancy beyond age 30-40 many factors have played a role, ranging from increased personal hygiene, public health policies, higher incomes, improved nutrition, reduced exposure to infectious diseases, behavioural change, infant feeding practices, and improved education for the majority of the population. How did these factors interact and enhance each other? In recent years there has been a particular stress on sanitary interventions, such as piped water and sewerage. However, reduced infant mortality levels can often not be linked to the instalment of piped water, moreover, mortality often declined before these sanitary innovations became available. Hence, the debate continues. We would like to encourage paper authors to contribute to the debate in this international conference.

Organisation

The conference is organized by Radboud University in collaboration with the COST-Action network [GREATLEAP](#) (CA22116), the [HiDo network](#), and the [IUSSP Panel 'Epidemics and Contagious Diseases: The Legacy of the Past'](#). The conference serves as a closing event of the NWO-funded research project '[Lifting the burden of disease. The modernisation of health in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, 1854-1926](#)'. It also marks the end of the academic career of professor Angélique Janssens, who directed this research project. The conference will therefore be concluded by a farewell event and reception.

Programme

The workshop sessions take place in the Maria Montessori Building (MM) room 04.610. Every presenter has 15-20 minutes for their presentation followed by a Q&A.

Thursday 28 August 2025

- 10:00-10:30 Registration and walk-in with coffee and tea
- 10:30-10:45 Welcome
Angélique Janssens & Tim Riswick (Radboud University)
- 10:45-12:30 **Session ‘New Perspectives on Studying the Histories of Health’**
Chair: *Paul Puschmann (Radboud University)*
1. East or West, Where Do Death Causes Manifest? Spatial Patterns of Historical Death Causes in Finland
Mark Spa (University of Turku)
 2. Sex Differences in Mortality in 20th-Century Greece: A Longitudinal, Cause-Specific Approach
Michail Raftakis (University of Bologna)
 3. Lifting the burden by Cooperation? The Sanitary Council in Egypt and international infectious disease cooperation, 1831-1843
Bryony Harris (Utrecht University)
 4. Deaths from infectious diseases in the wake of flood disasters in 19th-century Poznań
Grażyna Liczbińska (Adam Mickiewicz University)
- 12:30-13:30 Lunch
- 13:30-15:15 **Session ‘Epidemics and Pandemics around the World’**
Chair: *Mayra Murkens (University of Groningen)*
1. A failed cordon sanitaire in the 20th century: The missing Pacific influenza epidemics, 1918–21
Hampton Gaddy (London School of Economics)
 2. Previously underestimated? Multi-dimensional reconstruction of the health impact and mortality of the severe influenza epidemic in Geneva in 1837
Katarina Matthes (University of Zurich)
 3. Risk Factors in the 1885 Cholera Outbreak in Spain: An Evaluation of Hygienic Conditions
Joana Maria Pujadas Mora (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)
 4. How do epidemic diseases spread? A comparative Nordic study of the historical spatio-temporal patterns of two different diseases: measles and pertussis.
Aïda Nitsch (University of Turku)
- 15:15-16:00 Coffee break
- 16:00-17:15 **Keynote Lecture**
Chairs: *Angélique Janssens & Tim Riswick (Radboud University)*

Controlling Contagion: Epidemics and Institutions from Plague to Covid
Sheilagh Ogilvie (University of Oxford)

17:15-18:00 Drinks at CultuurCafé

18:30-20:30 Dinner at Restaurant Valdin

Friday 29 August 2025

10:00-11:45 **Session ‘Results from the Amsterdam Cause of Death Database’**

Chair: *Alice Reid (University of Cambridge)*

1. Infant and Child Mortality Decline in Amsterdam during the Epidemiological Transition, 1856-1926
Tim Riswick (Radboud University)
2. Adult Mortality in Amsterdam, 1856-1926
Joris Kok (Radboud University)
3. What caused the changing epidemiology of measles and pertussis mortality in Amsterdam 1856-1920?
Maarten van Wijhe (Roskilde University)
4. Cholera in Amsterdam, 1855 and 1866
Sanne Muurling (Radboud University) & Mayra Murkens (University of Groningen)

11:45-12:45 Lunch

12:45-14:30 **Session ‘Epidemiological Transitions over Time and Place’**

Chair: *Sanne Muurling (Radboud University)*

1. Epidemiological transition theory at colonial crossroads: the case of Suriname 1903-1949
Björn Quanjer (Radboud University)
2. Urban health penalties. The epidemiological transition in Belgian cities, 1890-2019
Isabelle Devos (Ghent University)
3. How Changed Infectious Disease Mortality in Madrid during the First Third of the 20th Century?
Michel Oris & Diego Ramiro Fariñas (Spanish Research Council)
4. Infant and Child Mortality in Portugal, 1902-1925. New data and findings
Isabel Oliveira (Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, ISCTE-IUL)

14:30-15:00 Break and walk-in Farewell Ceremony

15:00-16:00 Farewell Event in the Chapel of the Berchmanianum

16:00-17:30 Reception in the reception room of the Berchmanianum

Keynote Lecture (16:00-17:15, Thursday 28 August 2025)**Controlling Contagion: Epidemics and Institutions from Plague to Covid**

Sheilagh Ogilvie (Chichele Professor of Economic History, University of Oxford)

How do societies tackle epidemic disease? Long before scientific medicine, human societies coordinated and innovated in response to biological shocks—sometimes well, sometimes badly. This lecture uses historical epidemics to analyse how human societies deal with “externalities”—situations where my action creates costs or benefits for others beyond those that I myself incur. Social institutions—markets, states, communities, religions, guilds, and families—help us manage the negative externalities of contagion and the positive externalities of social distancing, sanitation, and immunization. Each institution enables us to coordinate, innovate and inspire each other to limit contagion. But each institution also has weaknesses that can make things worse. Markets shut down voluntarily during every epidemic in history—but they also brought people together, spreading contagion. States mandated quarantines, sanitation, and immunization—but they also waged war and censored information, exacerbating epidemics. Religions admonished us to avoid infecting our neighbours—but they also preached against science and medical innovations. Communities deployed peer pressure to foster neighbourly responsibility—but they also ignored problems outside the village boundaries and organized resistance to public health measures. What decided epidemic outcomes, history suggests, was neither market voluntarism, state despotism, religious moralism, nor communal social capital. Rather, effective controls to balance the epidemiological and economic costs of pandemics required coordination across a framework of interdependent institutions – a temperate state, an adaptable market, and a strong civil society in which a diversity of institutions played to their own strengths and checked each other’s flaws.

Drinks

After the keynote lecture all participants are invited for drinks in the [CultuurCafe](#) until 18:00.

Workshop Dinner

On the first day of the workshop, a dinner is organized for all presenters at restaurant [Valdin](#), which is about a 15 minute walk from the Cultuurcafe.

Farewell Event Angélique Janssens

The Radboud Group for Historical Demography and Family History is hosting a farewell event for professor Angélique Janssens on August the 29th. You are kindly invited to join us for this celebration. The event will take place at the Radboud University, in the Chapel (first floor) of the [Berchmanium](#) between 15:00 and 16:00. After the farewell ceremony, a reception will take place in the reception room (ground floor) until 17:30.

Getting to Nijmegen, Radboud University, and the workshop venues

Directions to Nijmegen

From Schiphol Airport

You can travel from the airport by train to Nijmegen Central Station, taking the intercity to Venlo, transfer at Utrecht Central Station, and take the train to Nijmegen. Trains leave every 15 minutes, and your journey takes around 1,5 hours.

From Eindhoven Airport

You can travel from the airport to Eindhoven Central station by bus, line 401, and take the train to Enkhuizen, transfer on 's Hertogenbosch, and take the train to Zwolle. Get off at Nijmegen Central Station.

By train

You can travel to Nijmegen Central Station.

Directions to the campus of Radboud University

Public transport

From Nijmegen Central Station bus line 10 will go every 5 minutes. Get off at Erasmus building. Next to line 10, you can also take line 15 (direction Wijchen via Heyendaal), or line 300 (direction Nijmegen Heyendaal) and get off at the Erasmus building.

From the city centre you can also take line 300 (direction Nijmegen Heyendaal) at bus stop Nijmegen, Centrum Oost or Nijmegen, Centrum Zuid. Get off at Erasmus building.

Car

There is the possibility to park on the campus. All outdoor parking spaces are accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Parking address: Heyendaalseweg 141 ([Gymnasium parking garage](#)). Please be aware that during working hours, parking costs 2 euro per hour, with a maximum of 10 euros a day.

Biking

From the Nijmegen Central Station and the city centre it is about 15 minutes biking (~3,5 km) to the campus. You can park your bike in the basement of the Elinor Ostrom building.

Walking

From Nijmegen Central Station and the city centre it is about 40 minutes walking (~3,5 km) to the campus.

Workshop Venues

[Maria Montessori Building](#) (8): room 04.610

[Berchmanianum](#) (1): Chapel and reception room

[CultuurCafé](#) (10)

Map campus

