

Report on Workshop ‘How Did We Lift the Burden? Infectious Disease Mortality in the Western and Non-Western World (1800–Now)’

Radboud University, 28–29 August 2025

On 28–29 August 2025, Radboud University hosted the international workshop *How Did We Lift the Burden? Infectious Disease Mortality in the Western and Non-Western World (1800–Now)*. Organised by Tim Riswick in collaboration with the COST Action network GREATLEAP, the HiDo network, and the IUSSP Panel *Epidemics and Contagious Diseases: The Legacy of the Past*, the event marked the closing conference of the NWO-funded research project *Lifting the burden of disease* and the academic farewell of Professor Angélique Janssens, who led this work.

The workshop gathered historians, demographers, and public health researchers to explore the complex dynamics of mortality decline from the nineteenth century to the present. As the background note to the meeting reminded participants, steep gains in life expectancy in the Western world began before the arrival of modern curative medicine after the 1940s. Understanding what drove these early transformations, and why they occurred unevenly across time and space, remains a key challenge for historical epidemiology.

Day 1 – New perspectives and global case studies

Following words of welcome from Angélique Janssens, the opening session, *New Perspectives on Studying the Histories of Health*, offered diverse methodological and geographical angles. Presentations examined spatial patterns of historical death causes in Finland, sex differences in twentieth-century Greek mortality, early nineteenth-century international health cooperation in Egypt, and the infectious disease impacts of flood disasters in nineteenth-century Poznań.

The afternoon brought the session *Epidemics and Pandemics around the World*, which broadened the scope beyond Europe. Contributions revisited the Pacific’s experience of the 1918–21 influenza pandemic, reconstructed the health impact of Geneva’s severe 1837 influenza epidemic, assessed risk factors in Spain’s 1885 cholera outbreak, and compared Nordic patterns of measles and pertussis spread.

A highlight of the first day was the keynote lecture by Sheilagh Ogilvie (University of Oxford), *Controlling Contagion: Epidemics and Institutions from Plague to Covid*. Drawing on centuries of epidemic history, Ogilvie analysed how markets, states, religious bodies, and communities have mediated both the positive and negative externalities of contagion control. She argued that effective epidemic responses historically depended on coordination across multiple institutions, each counterbalancing the weaknesses of the others.

The day concluded with informal discussions over drinks at the CultuurCafé and a workshop dinner at Restaurant Valdin.

Day 2 – Amsterdam research findings and comparative transitions

The second day began with *Results from the Amsterdam Cause of Death Database*, presenting new analyses from the host project. Papers examined infant and child mortality decline during the city’s epidemiological transition (1856–1926), adult mortality trends, the shifting epidemiology of measles and pertussis, and the cholera outbreaks of 1855 and 1866.

The final academic session, *Epidemiological Transitions over Time and Place*, placed Amsterdam’s experience in comparative perspective. Topics ranged from Suriname’s colonial epidemiological transition, to urban health penalties in Belgian cities over more than a century,

to infectious disease mortality shifts in early twentieth-century Madrid, and new data on infant and child mortality in Portugal (1902–1925).

Farewell to Angélique Janssens

The workshop concluded with a farewell ceremony for Professor Janssens in the Chapel of the Berchmanianum, celebrating her career and contributions to historical demography. A closing reception offered a final opportunity for exchange and reflection among participants.

Concluding reflections

Across its two days, the workshop illustrated the richness of current research into the history of infectious disease mortality. While the case studies varied in location, period, and disease focus, common themes emerged: the multi-causality of mortality decline, the need for fine-grained spatial and temporal analysis, and the interplay of public health interventions, social change, and environmental conditions. The discussions underscored that lifting the burden of disease has always been a collaborative process - both historically and in contemporary scholarship.