



## NORWEGIAN CEMETERY MAY HOLD CLUES TO SPANISH FLU

When World War I ended Nov. 11, 1918, and mud-caked soldiers finally began emerging from the trenches, they carried hope in their hearts because peace had finally arrived. Unfortunately, many also carried death in their lungs. This death was the horribly contagious Spanish flu, which was also known as the Spanish Lady, and it would kill an estimated 20 to 40 million people before petering out.

In the fall of 1998, 80 years after the Spanish flu pandemic swept the world, Dr. Kirsty Duncan of the University of Windsor will lead a team of scientists to the remote Norwegian island of Spitsbergen in an attempt to uncover the deadly virus's secrets. Despite its isolated setting, the tiny village of Longyearbyen was not spared the horrors of the 1918 flu — several of its casualties are buried in the village cemetery.

Duncan, a medical geographer at Ontario's University of Windsor, is hoping that the virus was also interred with 6 young male victims. She already knows from soil surveys that chances are good that she will find samples of the virus frozen in this Norwegian time capsule.

In order to proceed with the project, Duncan needed permission from the Norwegian governor of the area and the minister of culture. She also tracked down descendants of the 6 miners and received their permission to disturb the graves.

Dr. Tony Mazzulli, a microbiologist and infectious disease consultant at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital, says there is no chance of the Duncan pro-



The cemetery at Longyearbyen: the white crosses mark the graves of miners who died of influenza in 1918

ject once again unleashing the Spanish Lady on an unsuspecting world. "In 1918 the flu was a new genetic mixture that the human immune system had no memory of," he said. "Since that outbreak, the flu did not simply disappear, but adapted and mutated. Humans developed an immunity to this new flu through exposure."

Scientists are hoping that the Duncan expedition will come home with some samples of the original Spanish flu virus in its premutated and most deadly form.

"We tend to dismiss the flu as be-

ing nothing more than a few days of illness," said Mazzulli, "and we tend to forget that it has killed more people than any other disease and it will occur again."

Last December, the world's virus hunters received a glimpse of the form new viruses might take when "chicken flu" crossed over into the human population in Hong Kong without using an intermediate host. The Spanish flu is thought to have crossed from ducks to pigs to humans, which is the usual passage between species. — © Peter Wilton