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“Migration and Epidemics: When the Swiss public health system faces populations on the move during the 20th century”

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Summary

Until the end of the 19th century, the Swiss authorities were primarily concerned with isolated epidemic outbreaks through local regulations and laws. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, due to many factors such as increasing population movements, several waves of epidemics occurred throughout the entire country. The Swiss government and regional health authorities were put to the test.

In my talk, I will first recall the main ancient theories on epidemics and their causes, and the biomedical discoveries of the 19th century that had a major impact on the public health measures in the following century. I will then present how the Swiss public health system managed epidemics related to migration situations during three periods of the 20th century: the so-called Russian Cholera around 1900, the Spanish flu during World War I, and tuberculosis among migrant workers after World War II.

The correlation between the medical viewpoint and administrative decisions suggests that many anti-epidemic measures perpetuated and continued to evolve in line with scientific knowledge and new technologies. But epidemics are also accompanied by social and economic disorganization, popular beliefs, and misinformation, that are the source of fears and stigmatization of considered at-risk social groups – such as populations on the move or migrants. All these elements come into play in the epidemics management of health decision-makers.