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‘Trends and causes of infant mortality in Rostock: An investigation of individual level cause-of-death data, 1800-1910’

The SHiP-network aims to study in a comparative fashion the dynamics of mortality change in high-level disease environments in port cities across Europe. The network focuses on port cities for which we have individual-level cause-of-death data for the entire population for approximately the period 1850-1930. These are truly unique datasets and enable us to go beyond what was captured in highly aggregated national statistics based on extremely limited 19th-century disease classifications. An important step towards comparative research is the development of a joint international historical coding system for causes of death. The SHiP historical cause-of-death coding system is based on the ICD-10 coding system. The advantage is that this allows for long-term trends and changes to be investigated. The ICD-10 system is however adapted to also allow the incorporation of historical designations in such a way that this information will be preserved for analysis.

In the proposed session, the ICD10h coding system is tested for infant mortality to determine and compare the dominant cause-of-death pattern of infants in different European port towns over time. In addition, also the use of the ICD10h coding system in practice is tested. Each paper is based on a single case study of one of the SHiP port towns, and follows the same research questions, the same methodological approach, and a comparable time frame. For instance, trends in infant, neonatal and post-neonatal mortality rates are not only constructed over time, but also by cause-of-death categories. These causes of death will be divided into the following categories: congenital birth disorders, weakness, convulsions, water-food borne, teething, air-borne, other infectious, other non-infectious, external causes, ill-defined and unknown. This makes it possible to examine how the causes of death differed between locations and how they developed over time.

This specific paper is based on these descriptive and explorative results to see how the causes of death developed over time in the Hanseatic city of Rostock, Germany, during the period 1800–1910.