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‘What was killing babies in Amsterdam? An investigation of infant mortality using individual level causes of death, 1856-1930’

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 which 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 ICD10 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 from approximately mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century. For instance, trends in Infant Mortality Rates, Neonatal Mortality Rate 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, and ill-defined and unknown. This makes it possible to see 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 Amsterdam during the period 1856-1930.