

Alberta Doctors' Digest

How are you doing now ...

I've heard politicians on both sides of the border ask their audiences the above in recent weeks. It's more than a rhetorical question and a ridiculous one at that, denoting either faulty memory on the part of the speaker – and likely the audience, too – or the peculiar way our brains trick us into thinking all yesteryears were sunnier than the present.

The truth is that four years ago we were dealing with an incipient pandemic that killed many of us, wrought havoc with our economic circumstances, both public and private, and has left us reeling with the repercussions of global trauma. Governments everywhere threw money at the problem, with variable success, which has led to stubbornly persistent inflation of which we're painfully aware, but which we don't remember as part of the emergency measures we should recall.

Experts, roundly disparaged these days, tell us that our COVID experience was generally fortunate, that the millions of deaths worldwide that we did experience were curtailed in short order by the rapid development, approval and delivery of vaccines that we should all celebrate. The disease has become more manageable, less of a millstone on the health system, but it hasn't gone away. Federal data disclose several thousand new cases each month, most managed out of hospital, but deaths are still attributable to the virus. As well, a separate crisis persists with "long COVID," whose debilitating symptoms last months or years with several million sufferers recorded by Statistics Canada last year.

Along with this, vaccination rates have plunged with only a minority of people following recommended schedules for updates. Seniors have been somewhat better at keeping up with vaccination, but their rates have fallen too. Perhaps even more alarmingly, vaccination rates have fallen for a variety of preventable illnesses in children and adults too, at the same time that experts – now near the bottom rung of those we'll listen to – warn us that "the fire next time" or our next pandemic will likely be more virulent, more contagious and more lethal.

It may turn out that the most damaging legacy of our experience with SARS-COV-2 may be the politicization of science and public health measures. Most citizens likely felt that institutions were trying to keep up with a crisis that seemed ever more threatening and complied as best they could with public health measures. Others, however, saw lockdowns and vaccine mandates as infringements on human rights and are still angry, in high dudgeon.

This contrariness must be considered as pernicious to science, to truth and to civic responsibility but represents only the latest in a series of assaults over the last several decades. Explanations for this abound and are unsatisfactory except to note we're overloaded with a plethora of problems. We've arguably become hostage to a hodgepodge of generally rebellious folk loosely united by their complaints, their anger, their righteousness and their passion for revolution.

In the context of COVID, many families have been riven by opposing but vehement beliefs regarding the utility of masks, vaccines, social distancing, as well as by more

favourable views involving diverse unsupported remedies and nostrums. Significant numbers of the citizenry remain obdurate, truculent and unwilling to listen.

So much for compromise, listening, and patching up differences ...

We may eventually bridge this crevasse in our social fabric – but perhaps not. In contradistinction, and as a bona fide oldster, I remember the Salk and Sabin polio vaccines that were welcomed so fervently in the middle of the last century by parents terrified of possible paralysis and death.

What, indeed, has happened?

A myriad of things have happened, but it may well be that the digital revolution, the monster we've not learned to control, has put us in contact with the very worst features of ourselves. On an increasingly imperilled planet, we've gorged ourselves with counterfeit human interactions that don't assuage our existential loneliness. To the extent, however, that human nature has not changed – with the same mix of shysters, mountebanks and con artists as ever – we've become the worst versions of ourselves.

The larger questions this poses may be difficult to answer. More proximately, however, we – and by this I mean our governments, our institutions – should be assessing what we did during the pandemic. What worked? What didn't? Once again, our reluctance, our passivity and the extent of our ignorance is large. Instead, we're revamping the health care system here at home, something we've done oodles of times before – and here, too – no one knows whether earlier disruptions were worthwhile or not because there's no real evidence.

We're impelled, it would seem, to some sort of action. Already, at this early date in our hasty reinvention, I come across feel-good advertisements on YouTube and elsewhere – paid for by us, the citizens – announcing good times to come, refocusing on health care. When, however, has there ever been anything but a focus on health care? And the calls that became a drumbeat in the midst of our pandemic – regarding a host of capacity issues, with not enough beds, health care workers, equipment, and so on – remain unanswered.

No honest assessment

Just as there has been no honest assessment of what worked and what didn't regarding our COVID experience, here – and pretty much everywhere – instead we've moved on. In legerdemain fashion, I project we'll make some changes in organizational structure that will, as ever, be injurious, expensive and difficult to gauge. The costs of such change will be buried by fiscal mandarins promising further “organizational efficiencies.” Uncounted and discounted everywhere will be the human costs of change, which will go unacknowledged and beyond repair.

The next big divisive and destabilizing thing

Yet another issue looms large. Artificial intelligence has become our next big thing. We've heard the poems, jingles, sonnets and essays produced by newly accomplished software and realize we're somewhere between promise and peril. It may not long before we find out. New technologies, as we've found out with our social media, are

deeply divisive and destabilizing, and we've been colossal failures at predicting individual or collective futures.

In conclusion, I look to the deep past. We've read about our human cousins, the Neanderthals, who are no longer with us. They were accomplished beings who evidently hunted, buried their dead, wore jewellery and even had larger brains than Homo Sapiens. Thanks to interbreeding, bits of them are still with us, but they're gone. One theory, impossible to test, posits that they just weren't as good as Homo Sapiens at cooperating, at getting along, especially in large numbers.

Given our 8 billion or so souls and our formidable problems, I'm brought up short. I gulp at this possibility.

Stay nimble is my next best thought.

Brave New World, here we come – some of us at any rate.

Editor's note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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