

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Life in the time of COVID-19

It's not surprising that this issue of *Alberta Doctors' Digest* will deal with our continuing ordeal with COVID-19. The data are staggering, with 19 to 20 million cases globally and a reported mortality rate ranging from 2 to 8%. We're six or seven months into our struggle now, belying our early expectations for a limited period of suffering before the virus moved on, or for effective antiviral therapy or a vaccine that was on the way.

We were wrong – and wrong in spades. In Canada, we've generally been able to flatten the curve, but our American neighbors haven't been so fortunate. In particular, the southern USA and California have burgeoning caseloads, with full ICUs and a torrent of deaths that have required some sites to use refrigerated vehicles once morgues have filled.

Such hot spots are alarming but overlook the fact that recrudescence disease is everywhere, including most Canadian provinces. The low case numbers of a month or two ago evidently represented but transient success. The trillions of dollars spent by governments globally to support individuals and businesses are gone or going too, even as victories remain elusive and temporary.

Our mood is somber. We're worried and tired and often find it difficult to concentrate. The word that best describes our plight for me is an odd one: "discombobulated." This word's at least a century old and the "bob" part derives from an older word, "bobbery" connoting our bewilderment, upset and discomposure. We're discombobulated for sure.



Our thorniest dilemma relates to the spectrum of individual conduct and misconduct. (Photo credit: Vperemencom, Pixabay.com)

Given the near-total disruption of our lives, it's to be expected. In calmer, more halcyon times we realize that our lives are built on a framework of comfortable habits and routines. These have gone out the window, leaving us grimly yoked to hermit-like existences, physical distancing, face masks and hand sanitizers. Much of our upset likely reflects our grieving for pasts which we now recognize as remote and unobtainable, likely forever. For the first time in most of our lives, we experience the burden of possibly living under an oppressive enemy – think occupied France or Belgium in World War II – and the anxious sense that bad news can intrude at any time.

Years ago, Elizabeth Kubler Ross described the emotional consequences of death or major loss. Accordingly, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance are recognizable responses for most of us as we come to terms with our lost lives. Final acceptance may elude us, perhaps possible only once our suffering has personal meaning, as in committing to help or do battle, engaging our warrior selves. If this marauding coronavirus of protean manifestations has shown us anything, it has exposed obscene inequities everywhere we look, and there are ample targets to pursue seeking a better post-viral world.

We have been talking about “bubbles” for months now. The concept is reasonable, confining individuals’ social activities to groups of known persons that are relatively less suspect, allowing members to de-mask, eat and simulate past social interactions. What constitutes a group for one’s bubble has generally been decided on the basis of familial relationships. Think more rather than fewer interactions with siblings and cousins, whoever – the people one would expect to see at Thanksgiving or Christmas gatherings – and less contact with others who are unrelated.

Freer interactions in a closed system sound like a good idea, but problems relate to the nature of groups: Who’s out? Who’s in? How to move beyond this construct? Answering these questions isn’t always easy and reveals the fraught nature of our bubbles.

Though it’s early in our pandemic history, bubbles have become part of the tableau of our lives. They may be inherently limiting, self-reinforcing and hierarchical, requiring, as they do, certain exclusivity. They don’t, on the face of it, promote wider social engagement and altruism, and they may even nudge us toward more atavistic behavior in a competitive world. Rephrase the opening lines of John Donne’s famous poem, “no man is an island,” becomes, “no bubble is an island, entire of itself...”

We expect that our bubbles are here to stay, and that our masked, tentative selves may be necessary tomorrow and the next day and the one after that. On the other hand, bubbles have permitted a semblance of normal, and we’re fortunate that people have congregated in this way.

Our thorniest dilemma relates to the spectrum of individual conduct and misconduct. There are those who, six months out, continue to buck the herd. We’ve all seen youthful revellers who openly disregard the virus and its implications, feeling invincible or just plain lucky. Others, most apparent on our shopping forays, remain stolidly unresponsive, seemingly unaware of public health measures completely; it seems they’ve missed the news. Yet others are vociferous and intransigent, loudly trumpeting their “rights” in this time of pestilence. We’ve heard such folk before, proclaiming their rights to own submachine guns or not pay taxes.

Our heterogeneous responses to COVID-19 take place amidst a welter of conspiracy theories that have prospered in the vacuum of absent leadership, scurrilous political

infighting and accusations of “fake news.” We know that COVID-19 came to us from China, but some insist it was purposefully engineered there as an act of aggression. Still others blame Bill Gates, using microchips for global subjugation. I note recent attempts in an eastern province to set fire to communications towers, the “perps” evidently believing that 5G networks spread coronavirus.

As could be expected, those who believe our troubles in this pandemic are due to malevolence “out there” are less likely to practice distancing, use hand sanitizer, masks, etc. Twenty years ago, we thought that antivaxxers would go away after Andrew Wakefield’s fraudulent association of MMR measles vaccine with autism, but antivaxxers are more abundant than ever, and have in fact forged alliances with anti-masking and other single-issue groups.

Accordingly, the larger issue facing us as global citizens has to do with the nature of truth and how we recognize it. Regrettably, there seem to be a growing number of people in society who are willing, *sans* reason and *sans* evidence, to promote stories that are capricious or damaging. Evidence, as has been sought through decades and even centuries of labor, is our candle in the dark, and we must conform to the dictates of truth that science has brought us. Proceeding in any other way, we’re trampling on ourselves and others.

We must consider that this may, after all, be our “starter pandemic.” Let’s look for better, more scrupulous leadership all around, lest we find ourselves careening, once again, between inaction and ineptitude.

I recall my cartoon friend, Pogo, who said it best, years ago: “I have seen the enemy and he is us.”

May we have Pogo’s clarity.

May we act better, too.

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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