

Alberta Doctors' Digest

May you live in interesting times

The times we're in are complicated, dangerous and seem unending. We're burdened with worry, and our footing is tentative and insecure. For every two steps forward, we take at least a step and a half back.

We've gotten over the misguided notion that this plague-thing is going to be over any time soon. Most of us have had our vaccinations, both of them, and believe ourselves presumably home-free, but infections are burgeoning everywhere – a new wave largely affecting the unvaccinated; the new delta variant of the virus makes it as contagious as chicken pox and possibly more pathogenic.

What a strange world. Collectively we've been able to produce effective vaccines in record time but face widespread vaccine hesitancy or nihilism – call it what you will – from droves of folk who believe vaccines are the devil's work, iniquitous and more of a menace than the pandemic. To those of us grounded in science and evidence as truth, it's a bizarre turn of events, as significant public discourse has turned away from reason in favor of an assortment of shamans, grifters, snake-oil salesmen and the terminally deluded preying on our fears.

This wasn't supposed to happen. We knew there'd be a race to find a vaccine or effective antiviral drugs, but that, presumably, would be the answer, the solution, and presto, we'd be out of here. It hasn't worked out that way. There are still two camps – the optimists, who think things will eventually settle down, that it's just a matter of time, and the pessimists, who think we're up against a brick wall, with mutant strains of virus that are ever more concerning, especially in a climate of animus and fear.



Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew
(Photo credit: Pixabay.com)

I'm still among the optimists, especially on sunny days, or those with little news coverage, but – and permit me an aside here – I find myself wondering about our Neanderthal cousins, now gone some thirty centuries, perhaps because they were brutish, poor strategists or didn't like jewellery.

Some refer to the economic turmoil we've been through as "the great shakeout," and it's been impressive. Since March 2020 governments across the globe have spent \$16 trillion providing fiscal support amid the pandemic, and global central banks have increased their balance sheets by a combined \$7.5 trillion. Recall the old saw: a billion here and a billion there, and soon we're talking about real money.

Government support of citizens with emergency funds has averted major suffering but we're at a crossroads. The fiscal larders are bare, and we need clear success against the virus so that pent up demand for goods and services can justify the stock market evaluations based on expected growth. The range of possible scenarios gets dicey at this point, especially if there are snags en route.

We've been through major changes to get this far. Telemedicine has taken off like a rocket, and Amazon.com isn't going to lack business anytime soon. Beyond this, traditional notions of work have gone out the window as working from home or other remote locations has kept us as isolated as possible. The nature of work itself continues to evolve too; automation continues to replace historic roles for workers and, as the gig economy becomes ever more pervasive, job security becomes ever more concerning for individuals.

This has been called the year of the essential worker as nurses, grocery store clerks, cashiers and truck drivers have been lauded for their efforts through various lockdowns, but policy makers have generally not responded with either permanent increases in wages or job security. Political action has once again fallen far short of political rhetoric, and it appears that the pandemic will not change this calculus.

COVID-19 has laid bare a system already riddled with problems and inequity. Much essential work has historically been carried out by low-paid workers, especially recent immigrants who subsist without access to paid sick leave and who commonly live in high-density housing. Hiring immigrants to perform low-paid but essential work has long been established practice in Canada, just as reliance on unpaid labor has been central to social and economic development. Raising children, cleaning, cooking and caring for elderly relatives top the task lists that go unpaid, and women are relied on most particularly. Our pandemic has not brought anything new in terms of such labor trends but has instead reinforced historic injustices.

In spite of this, the pandemic has highlighted our interdependence but has also shown extreme variability in our global response to COVID. In particular, the race has not fallen to the resource-rich as many wealthy countries have struggled. This was unexpected: SARS-CoV-2 was a virus we should have been ready for, especially given our recent experience with MERS and SARS, and coronaviruses were already on our priority lists. The pandemic has instead amplified long-standing structural and systemic health inequities and has demonstrated the remarkably indifferent engagement of health systems with citizens' determinants of health.

Early on in this battle, there were prognostications and promises that the world that would emerge post-pandemic would be a better place. A year ago, it must be remembered that we were reeling from one of our most significant failures in plague

response as senior citizens across the land died in long-term care homes isolated from family and friends. “Never again, never again,” went the chorus.

Celebrated author Arundhati Roy [spoke of new beginnings](#):

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

But not much has happened. Not much has happened anywhere, ranging from attending to health and economic inequities, to rational thinking about what to do with senior citizens, to constraints against unbounded and predatory capitalism.

I get it. We’re tired and only human. That’s the crux of things, I suppose. There’s been a chance for us to rethink the doomsday machine we’ve built for ourselves, and I don’t know whether we’re up to it or not.

Let me go back thirty or forty thousand years. Perhaps something similar befell the Neanderthals. Maybe they just weren’t paying attention.

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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