

Alberta Doctors' Digest

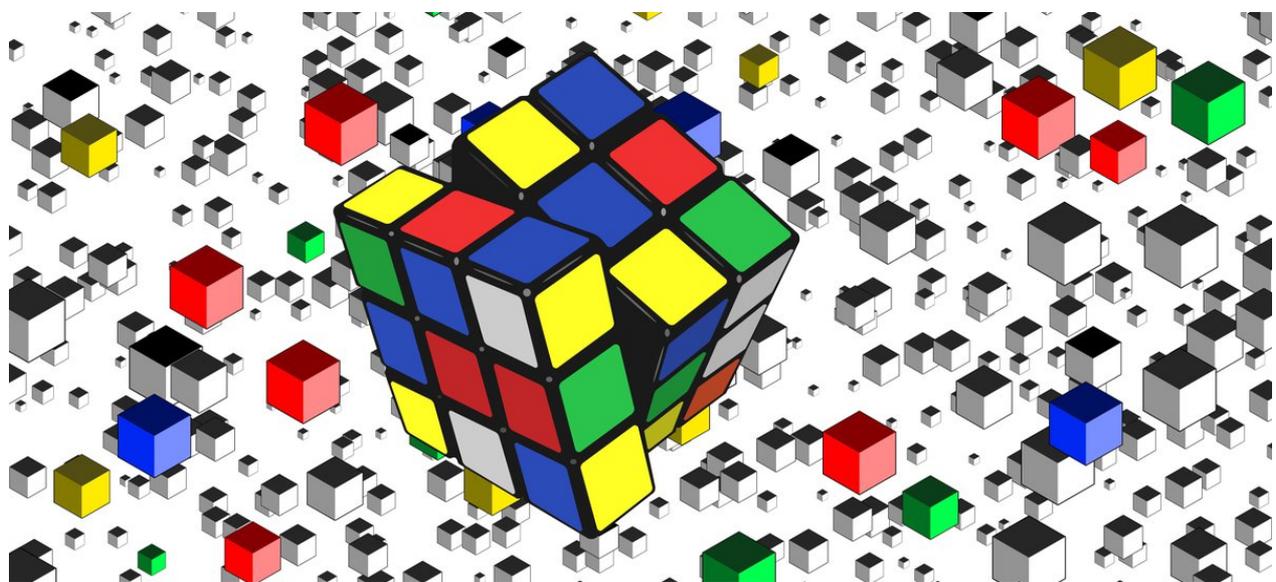
Irrational man

As we prepare for a third year in our long and chaotic battle against the COVID-19 virus, we are deeply uncertain about our future in these fraught times. What we thought was going to be a short skirmish – I had in mind a month, perhaps two – has become an ordeal of recurring waves of rising cases that threaten to overwhelm our capacity to deal with them.

This has happened against a background of increasingly violent and extreme weather events, attributable to climate change. And our other pandemic – of opiate-related drug deaths – continues. Authoritarianism is on the rise most everywhere. Citizens are angry and increasingly predisposed to smash-and-grab looting and violence that mirrors the larger malfeasance or lawlessness at work on the global stage.

We're in trouble, and we're doing hard time. Our woes seem interdependent and insoluble, a malign version of Rubik's cube. Even before things became this grim, we knew we were in a new era – the Anthropocene – and we knew we were in trouble considering our rap sheet and environmental carnage.

Given the mess that we're in, our dominant issue of the past couple of years, our plague, may be the problem we understand best. Our dilemma relates to vaccines, effective and now widely available, that have been miraculous technical achievements. Getting them into arms, as they say, has been another story. Just 43% of the world's population has had [at least two injections](#). Less wealthy countries have had less favorable access to vaccines, with relative hoarding by the well-to-do. Although this could have been expected, it makes no sense since the pandemic is truly global, and we are all at risk. No doubt it's a lesson we'll have to learn if we are to address the inequities that accompany climate change.



Our woes seem interdependent and insoluble, a malign version of Rubik's cube. (Photo credit: Gerd Altmann, Pixabay.com)

A second issue, closer to home, involves reluctance of up to a third of citizens to take the vaccine. Some of the vaccine-hesitant maintain that there's an information gap here, with many unknowns, especially long-term effects; they'd prefer to wait and see. Another cadre of the vaccine-hesitant are more forceful in balking; they view intervention as violating the right of an individual to forego the vaccine. Most worrisome and generally most strident are a third group, who see dark forces at work and who can be identified through malign and generally fantastical tales that are often unbounded and that can incorporate subplots that may involve death cults, mind control, Satanism, microchips and even Bill Gates.

Some of the suspicion regarding vaccines may not be unreasonable, such as our instinctual avoidance of unknown potions and remedies, given our predilection in times past for shamans and witch doctors and snake oil. As well, who hasn't balked at needles? Yet the success of preventing illness through vaccination, pioneered by Edward Jenner, goes back several hundred years, and it has been remarkably effective and consistent. Despite this, citizens have crowed about "their rights" even as smallpox, polio and childhood fevers have succumbed to science.

This is the fix we're in as the numbers of sufferers wax and wane. Experts look at our burgeoning numbers of patients in attempts to alert us to imminent threats with patients too numerous and too ill to look after. We're approaching [2 million cases in Canada and some 30,000 deaths](#), but the virus is not done with us as new variants emerge to renew the pandemic's vigour.

We've been remarkably tolerant of many bizarre and unpromising therapies (Ivermectin, clay, bleach, peroxide, eye of newt, etc.) and of obnoxious disregard for others. Crazy, I'd say and would argue for stricter compulsory measures and their early introduction. I'd override human rights perceptions here, supported by [John Stuart Mill's justification](#):

"The only purpose for which power can be rightly exercised over any member of a civilized community, against one's will, is to prevent harm to others."

If this suggests a certain exasperation or irritability, I'm guilty but seem to be [supported by Albert Einstein](#):

"Two things are infinite; the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the universe."



Our armamentarium is small enough; our messages should be consistent. (Photo credit: Gerd Altmann, Pixabay.com)

I'm concerned as well at the confused and confusing messaging we've consistently gotten from our leaders. Though leadership groups have public health experts in their midst, it's hard to say how much sway true experts have had, outnumbered and outranked by politicians with little or no science background. Politicos are in the business of pleasing the electorate; when an intransigent but major fraction of the electorate are convinced that science is fraudulent, closing schools and businesses, along with masking, testing and vaccines may not play well with that crowd. Our armamentarium is small enough; our messages should be consistent.

In a way, we might have been further ahead if the virus had been *more rather than less* infectious. If every second or every third person had come down with illness straightaway, rather than something in the order of every twentieth person, it might have impelled more robust support for mandatory measures that could have abridged our pandemic misery.

Compared with other global assaults – the recent subprime mortgage debacle or the Great Depression – our pandemic has left equity markets in reasonable shape, buoyed as they've been by governmental spending of mammoth proportions. I'm not faulting this; it's one of the things we've done right. We're butting up against problems here too, however. The wells must be close to running dry, and no one knows what to do with the debt involved, especially anticipating further waves of lockdown.

The markets are poised to resume growth mode, given pent up demand and relief from the impositions of the virus, a sort of goldilocks or wishful-thinking scenario that may or may not pan out. The buzz at the time of writing has to do with a new and more infectious variant of the preceding virus that may upstage anything we've seen so far. We're in an economic and an existential no man's land at the moment. Our stance is precarious: we're walking a tightrope across a canyon, and the weather may be turning.

Perhaps the biggest irony has to do with what we know of the virus. Not that many years ago we had little enthusiasm for Charles Darwin and evolution, certainly regarding its pertinence to us. Now our lives quite literally depend on coronavirus mutation and whatever accompanying illness is next.

There is much we'd rather not know. I'm not surprised to hear that [school boards are burning books again](#). Our abilities regarding denial are extreme. We should more properly be called Homo irrationalis (or something close; my Latin's rusty). There is little that is sapient or wise about us.

So, what to do? Have our individual and collective futures ever looked this uncertain, this frightening?

Here's the best advice available in tough spots:

Do the next thing that needs to be done. Then do the next thing after that. Certainly, check the rigging, whatever, but mostly carry on ... one foot in front of the other. Repeat.

Small solace, perhaps, but remember – we're in wartime.

Do the right thing.

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.

Banner image credit: Pixabay.com