

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Better news

I'm happy at the return of ducks and geese to the riverside park where I walk most days, and I'm happy too at the return of a semblance of normal after the fraught times that have accompanied two-plus years of pandemic. My fellow walkers seem more buoyant too. We're generally unmasked now – hurrah! – and walk in closer proximity to others. Discarded masks are common debris, evidence of our recent travails dropped trailside.

The coronavirus that has beleaguered us isn't the emergency it once was, but neither is it gone. Across the province there are still hundreds of sufferers in hospital and plenty of deaths, but we don't fear an overrun system anymore. Our past seems a welter of ebbs and flows of illness, coronavirus variants, vaccines and boosters.

If things are more manageable, it's likely due to two factors. Firstly, a growing majority of us seem to have some immunity to SARS-CoV-2, whether from vaccination, survived infections or both. As well, the new variants of virus, though more transmissible, have proven less deadly. When the original Omicron B.A.1. swept across the land, it was notable for its enhanced contagiousness, but recent sub variants are more transmissible still. Though reinfection with Omicron variants does occur, our vaccines have remained protective against most severe illness.

This means that most of us know a handful of people who are ill with COVID at any given time, but these folk generally recover well at home or with short periods of hospitalization. As the virus has become less deadly but more difficult to avoid, mask mandates have been lifted most everywhere. Public health guidance has changed too, with more emphasis on the individual deciding to avoid risky situations or to mask up as would seem appropriate. This relative freedom has been embraced with alacrity by budget-conscious politicians and a public grown weary with constrained existences.



Some changes have been major or tectonic, and involve the nature of work (Image credit: Batian Lu, Pixabay.com)

Where this will lead is anyone's guess. We've opined "it's over" too often before to be anything but tentative and hopeful. While we're fortunate indeed that viral strains have become less deadly with time, the continuing mutability of the virus might render it more pernicious, more deadly, at any time. Another note of caution: so-called "long COVID" has not gone anywhere and remains poorly understood and enigmatic.

If this describes present times – an uncertain stand-off of sorts – we're only beginning to gauge the carnage our pandemic has wrought. We're aware of the billions and billions of dollars governments most everywhere have spent on our behalf, and we know that this support has saved many from personal tragedy, but we're aware, too, that we've mortgaged our futures. The pandemic has exposed social inequities most everywhere and to the extent that these have been structural and historic, change will not be easy.

Some changes have been major or tectonic, as they say, and involve the nature of work. Office visits to physicians are a prime example: they've been replaced as appropriate with phone calls and telemedicine. It's a change that's likely to persist.

Pre-pandemic, work intruded increasingly into home life with 24/7 communications. With the pandemic, remote work or work from home with Zoom calls has proven surprisingly agreeable and has prompted many to reassess their work-lives and look for better, more satisfying circumstances. Office buildings have been affected too. As one cryptic observer put it, office buildings are beginning to resemble pyramids: things perhaps to marvel at but with limited utility.

The plague has drawn particular attention to the elderly and long-term care. Our early response to the pandemic involved protracted isolation for these folk, who were kept in lockdown and incommunicado but who nevertheless perished in great numbers. Again,

many in charge promised, “never again, never again.” This is a segment of the population without much muscle, however, and it’s easily disregarded.

We’ve found *capacity* issues everywhere. By comparisons with much of the developed world, we’re running too close to the bone on a number of fronts. We scrimp on hospital beds and health care workers alike and respond poorly to unanticipated demand. The same is true in respect of our schools, which are overcrowded and inadequately resourced.

If we’ve been left with an enormous game of catch-up to address our deficiencies, especially given the risk of new viruses, the social dimensions of our pandemic may be most concerning. Though data aren’t easy to come by, it’s likely that 2/3 of the citizenry paid attention to the pandemic and followed public health guidance with respect to masking, social distancing and vaccination. Beyond this, perhaps a third of citizens were non-compliant, becoming labelled as “vaccine-hesitant” or “vaccine avoidant.” Fear of the unknown nature of our affliction was a factor here, but they simply failed to consider that a global pandemic was a matter of concern to everyone.

A number of unvaccinated adults worried that the vaccination procedure was more dangerous than COVID itself, sans evidence. This is very difficult to understand, since many, if not most, of these folk had presumably been vaccinated earlier and routinely against diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps and so on. Many anti-vaxxers fail to recognize the communal benefits of vaccinations as well, protecting their kith and kin from infectious illness.

Much of the reluctance to follow isolation, masking and immunization protocols has been attributed to the tangle of rumours, half-truths and outright lies embodied in conspiracy theories that pervade the digital world. These typically maintain that malevolent, secret forces are at work in society and promote snake-oil therapies and other nostrums that are irrational, unstudied – and often frankly dangerous.

To the extent that so many have balked and foregone public health measures, society has suffered, the pandemic has lasted longer than need be, and unnecessary numbers have died. Major schisms or splits in social structure have developed along these lines and have proven as difficult to deal with as they are to explain. Many families have members on either side of various rational/irrational divides and have been riven by conflict both rancorous and durable.

This boils down, for most of us, to a search for truth. The truth we’re most secure about, on a day-to-day basis, is that which we’ve gleaned through the long process of discovery we call the scientific method. Who needs reminding that without this, most of our conveniences including phones, computers, television and medical technology would not exist? In discarding the hard-won things we know about the world, vaccine deniers must feel estranged from society-at-large and unrepresented in our general discourse. Frustration, anger and tribalism are unfortunate concomitants of this conflict and, at worst, result in social and technical paralysis.

Many of our experts have told us that COVID-19 is something we should have expected and that we should have been prepared for. They’re likely right as we confront an illness that’s come our way but isn’t new. So-called monkey pox is an illness that isn’t new and one that’s usually confined to West and entral Africa. On May 7 of this year, a case of monkey pox was reported in Britain; less than two weeks later more than 100 cases were confirmed or suspected in Europe, and at writing it’s been found in small numbers

across Canada. It's an illness that isn't commonly deadly and is preventable with immunization.

Given our recent history, it sounds new and not-so-new at the same time. Once again, global and local changes to the Earth's climate may be driving new opportunities for viral transmission between animal species.

To return to my account of a daily walk – beyond cacophonous birds, I notice bees and other insects. I know the bees are imperiled but appreciate them because they cooperate, they are remarkably adaptable, and they work.

They serve as valuable lessons to us.

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