

Corona Virus Message, Part 2

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I hope you all are getting used to this drill, and/or finding ways to cope. I don't need to tell you that all the kids are home trying to remote learn, as are most of their parents trying to still make a living remotely. Looks like a mess, feels like a mess, is a mess. Lots of tough decisions between rocks and hard places.

First, the numbers briefly: At the end of last month, I was trying to get you ready for what was coming. Maine had had only about 10 cases and 1 death by the last week in March. Now, as of April 26th, we are at nearly 1000 cases, and at least 50 deaths, both surely undercounts given the continued shortage of testing supplies. There has been some leveling off in those daily reported numbers (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/maine-coronavirus-cases.html?searchResultPosition=2>), but we are indeed still in the midst of it. Much of the rest of the country is doing worse. Maine is the 8th best state by total cases, but corrected for our smaller population, still 18th best by cases per population (also available at that NY Times URL). The US has had over 50,000 deaths and probably lots more (because of testing shortages), representing 25% of world-wide deaths. I don't think this is making American great again. Slow and confused leadership nationally has clearly contributed to a slower than possible response.

Even hospitals and medical practices have slowed, in all areas except emergency rooms and intensive care units, in order to prepare for further increases in the very sick patients. But if we can flatten the curve at this point, the hope is that medical systems may be able to open back up to some routine care in May. Right now, people with other types of on-going medical problems are not coming to be seen, both because they fear catching covid 19 and/or are discouraged by all the new screening barriers to get into the medical systems. I spoke to a 45-year old man's family 2 days ago; he had been having chest pain with minimal exertion for several days, did go to the ER where blood studies and EKG were ok, and was sent home and told to come back if it didn't get better or worsened. His symptoms continued; he thought it might be coronavirus and somehow got a test for it (in another state), which was negative. So now he is reassured though he continues to have chest pain with exertion, almost surely due to "unstable angina", which should be worked up further and fixed with medicines or coronary artery repair. There are widespread medical reports of such delays and underutilization going on all over the country, associated with treatable acute disease.

The over-65 population is being especially hard hit by the disease. The majority of deaths are in that group. All we can do is socially distance to avoid overwhelming our medical systems until an antibiotic and/or a vaccine can be found. That's going to take at least 6 and 24 months respectively, to be done safely. The highest mortalities in Maine and elsewhere, are in long term care facilities with their aged and often medically complicated populations.

Likewise, the economy is taking a huge hit. It's hard to do business, and at the same time, achieve social distancing in almost all jobs, even the essential ones. Careful, one step at a time re-opening will be tried, but hopefully with dramatically increased testing capability. Once most people can be tested, we can find those who have had the disease without knowing it and therefore may be resistant as well as new cases, whose contacts can then be chased down, tested, and if positive, quarantined by Maine CDC staff. To do that, large numbers of such staff must be recruited and trained. That strategy could get us much more safely to the antibiotic/vaccine goals in a couple years. Our local economy depends a lot on summer visitors, many from areas of the country with higher infection rates. Their return over the next few months will require them to quarantine strictly for 14 days by the Governor's orders, and then to practice safe distancing thereafter. Neighbors Driving Neighbors (<http://www.neighborsdrivingneighbors.org/>) has set up a system to help supply them during that quarantine with picked up groceries, if they don't bring enough with them. Short term camp rentals may continue to be forbidden by the Governor, as are hotels currently.

I discussed personal and family/home safety precautions in last month's town newsletter. Those strategies remain the same but with the addition now of mask-wearing when out and about. Since many have the disease without symptoms but can still spread it, mask wearing protects others from the mask wearer if he/she is a silent spreader. It is difficult to carefully avoid germs you can't see; one has to imagine where they might be as we go through our daily lives.

I lead discussions of current research on this viral illness and lots more advice like this at my now weekly question and answer sessions, Saturdays, 10 A.M., by Zoom and conference call. If you live or summer in Mt. Vernon, Vienna or Fayette and would like to be on my list of invitees, email me your name, town, and phone number (cell preferred) and I will email you an invitation the Thursday before each meeting.

So, there is hope, but unfortunately there's a lot of frustration and hard work ahead of us for quite a while.