

For my daughters:

October 1, 2020

The Coronavirus Pandemic *The New Normal*

Last Monday, the number of people killed worldwide by COVID-19 passed one million individuals. The country with the most deaths was our own, with 207,000 COVID-19 deaths in the ten months since the first USA COVID-19 fatality on February 26th. Today when I read about the particular danger of COVID-19 infection to elder folk with pre-existing conditions, I cannot help but cringe, as I am 78 years old and have a basket-full of those conditions -- I carry on my back a huge bull's eye target for the virus to hone in on. This week I am undergoing a battery of tests to check into all of my pre-existing conditions before being allowed to go visit my little granddaughter Jedariah. When last I held little Jed (called Cynthia by her parents) she was only a few weeks old. Eight months have passed since that innocent day, before anyone spoke of pandemic. Not one to wait on history, Jed has spent those eight months growing. This week, on ZOOM, I saw how she has recently learned to drink out of a glass like a big girl:



Before I leave on this month-long journey into the future to hug my first granddaughter, I wanted to give you girls a report on the lay of the land so far as the coronavirus pandemic is concerned. Four recent press accounts are very misleading, and need a little explaining.

Misleading Account #1: The Crisis Is Over

Last week the White House economic advisor Larry Kudlow told reporters that Trump had conquered COVID-19. “*We’ve regained control of the virus,*” he bragged. Dismissing the severity of the virus, he rejected the significance of the surge in cases, claiming that 37 states have “*virtually no problems.*” At the Republican National Convention he used the past tense when thanking President Trump for his “*roaring success*” in addressing the pandemic. “*Presidential leadership came swiftly and effectively,*” he said, “*with an extraordinary rescue.*”

I call this the ostrich strategy for dealing with the pandemic– if you ignore COVID-19 it will go away. As the presidential election looms, this denial is being repeated again and again by administration officials, as if saying it often enough will make it common knowledge.

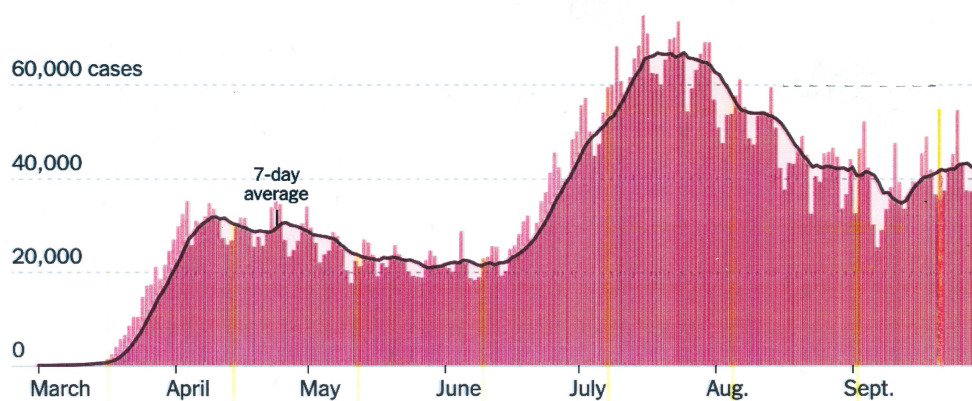
But fate has a sense of humor: Today President Trump himself tested positive for COVID-19. Shunning face masks has had a consequence after all.

What does the Fauci meter say? “*We are still knee-deep in the first wave of this,*” Dr. Fauci said on Facebook today. Make no mistake. The crisis is not over.

Misleading Account #2: Our “New Normal” Is Fine

So what is the situation today? If Kudrow has his eyes tightly shut, what would he see if he opened them? What is the situation he is asking the nation to live with, the new normal? A look at the daily load of new cases paints a picture that is hardly a roaring success, and certainly not a world any sane person would wish were “normal:”

New reported cases by day in the United States



The initial restrictions imposed in March had bought months of time to establish widespread testing and contact tracing, but without national leadership this time was wasted. The Spring relaxation of restrictions slowed the decrease in caseload, the number of reported daily new COVID-19 cases slowly settling to around 20,000 by mid-June, a pretty awful number. By early summer bars had reopened and summer parties were in full-swing, creating a late summer surge in cases. Face masks came back into common usage, and the caseload fell again – but only for a while, as many people bought into the administration’s ostrich declarations. Many schools reopened on Labor Day, and the caseload has settled into a new “normal” of some 40,000 new cases each day – a very scary new normal!

We cannot let that be so. We cannot simply wait for a vaccine, with so many being infected each day. Today’s “normal” can be fought, and fought effectively, with the tools we have: face masks and social distancing – the very tools the White House continues to ignore.

Misleading Account #3: COVID-19 Deaths Are Over-Estimated

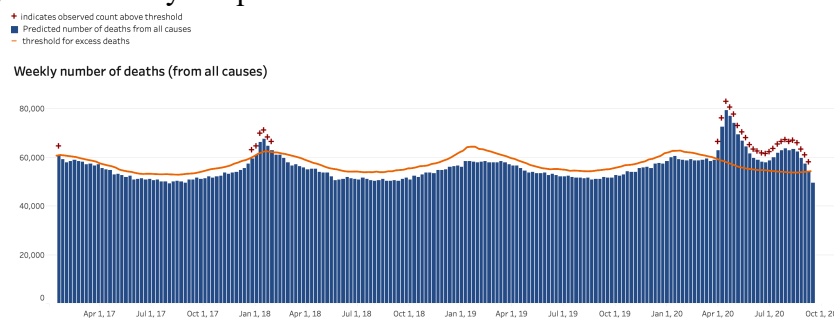
A bogus theory has been circulating on social media in recent days, apparently originating with the QAnon conspiracy movement, that “only 6% of the reported COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. are solely attributable to the new coronavirus.” Re-tweeting this claim, President Trump added that “only 6% of all the 153,504 deaths recorded actually died from Covid. That’s 9,210 deaths.” Other political figures have chimed in: On September 24 Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC) told a virtual town hall audience that the 200,000 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in the U.S. has been inflated in order to “encourage people to use social distancing.” He went on to claim, as Trump had, that the actual death count was much lower.

This alarming claim stems from an August 26 update posted to the CDC website providing a detailed breakdown of the accompanying health conditions (listed as “comorbidities”) reported on the death certificates of people who had died of COVID-19 in the United States. The CDC update noted that “For 6% of the deaths, COVID-19 was the only cause mentioned.”

In other words, 6% of the people who died of COVID-19 infection didn’t have underlying conditions, such as diabetes, asthma, or heart disease, and didn’t experience any medical complications like kidney failure. But make no mistake: The other 94% of deaths were still caused by COVID-19. The underlying conditions simply made the patient more vulnerable, turning a serious virus infection deadly. Someone with diabetes – like myself – would live for decades except for the impact of the virus. In a similar fashion, the death certificates of most AIDS patients list the primary cause of death as a rare cancer like Kaposi’s sarcoma or as failure of some other body system, while the HIV virus is still what ultimately killed the person.

So is the social media uproar then simply silly, based on a total misreading of the CDC update? What does the Fauci meter say? Appearing on the TV show “Good Morning America” Dr. Fauci said “The numbers you’ve been hearing – there are 180,000-plus deaths – are real deaths from COVID-19. Let there not be any confusion about that.”

For anyone unconvinced, there is another way to look at this. Simply step back and compare the number of deaths this year with the number seen in years past. If COVID-19 is killing a lot of people this year, then this comparison would be expected to show “excess mortality” this year caused by the pandemic. Does it?



Yep. Looking at weekly number of deaths over the last few years, we see excess mortality (blue death lines rise above the red line threshold) in 2017-2018 because 80,000 Americans died that year of flu. Now look at last summer (the right edge of the graph). You see a huge excess mortality over the red threshold line, mirroring the initial wave and the later surge of COVID-19 that occurred in those months. The excess mortality numbers indicate that we are actually underestimating the death toll by as much as 30%. The real number of COVID-19 deaths in the United States is probably a lot closer to 300,000 than 200,000 – about 10% of the 2.8m Americans who die each year. And the year isn’t over yet.

Misleading Account #4: We Are Approaching Herd Immunity

President Trump recently announced that the pandemic is “*rounding the corner*” and “*would go away even without a vaccine*” because of herd immunity. The general idea is that if the people that an infected person contacts are mostly immune because they have already had the virus, then it is not likely the virus will spread. A simple idea, well backed by solid science. It needs about 60% immunity to work, however. Have 60% of Americans been infected with COVID-19?

We can answer that question with hard data. On September 25 the CDC released an analysis of blood samples collected at commercial labs across the country this summer. Less than 10% contained antibodies to the COVID-19 virus. On the same day, Stanford scientists published in the *Lancet* an examination of 28,500 blood samples from dialysis centers in 46 states. They found antibodies to COVID-19 in just over 9%. The epidemic modelers at Dr. Murray’s institute have also made an estimate of how many Americans have had the virus. Their estimate? 29 million. That’s 9% of the population. So the answer to the question of how many Americans have been infected with COVID-19 is 9%, not 60%.

But do antibodies tell the full tale? Dr. Scott Atlas, a radiologist who is President Trump’s new pandemic advisor, said last week that “*most of the immunity for this virus is felt to be due to T-cell immunity.*” He is suggesting that many Americans already have immunity and just don’t know it. While the blood of these individuals contains no antibodies to COVID-19, Atlas argues, it does contain T-cells primed to protect against any coronavirus. What? Where in the world are these virus-fighters coming from? Atlas suggests that these coronavirus-fighting T-cells are the remnants of past infections by the coronaviruses that cause the common colds we all get from time to time. Dr Atlas goes on to suggest that half of all Americans have had colds and possess such coronavirus-primed T-cells. Add in the 10% or so of Americans already immunized by COVID-19 infection, he says, and you get 60% who cannot be infected by the virus -- herd immunity. That, says Dr. Atlas, is why the pandemic is dying out.

Can this be true? Do T-cells primed by common colds offer protection against COVID-19? Let’s consult the Fauci meter. Last week Dr. Fauci said that he “*knew of no scientific evidence*” that common cold-derived T-cells protect against infection with COVID-19. Furthermore, he added, any contention that the pandemic is dying out “*makes absolutely no sense at all.*”

So what we are left with is a conclusion drawn from hard data: Over 90% of Americans have not yet been exposed to the COVID-19 virus.

Herd immunity is a pipe dream.

So you can see the situation has not changed in any important way in the last few weeks. Despite the hope-filled predictions emanating from the White House in these weeks preceding the presidential election, I still think you and I are at least a year away from being safely vaccinated. In all the long weeks until that bright day, it will remain important to be careful about social distancing, to wear face masks around others, and to stick pretty close to home. Every one of those days you will be in my and your mother’s thoughts. Stay safe.

Dad