

For my daughters:

November 3, 2020

The Coronavirus Pandemic

Now For the Main Event

While our family remains physically fragmented, we can be thankful that we are all healthy in a very unhealthy season. As you all know from our weekly ZOOMS, I have for the last four weeks been visiting my new granddaughter Jed in Atlanta. Your mother and I got to watch as she learned to crawl, and in general to enjoy all those wonderful things that grandparents have always relished – without having to get up in the middle of the night to quiet a crying baby.

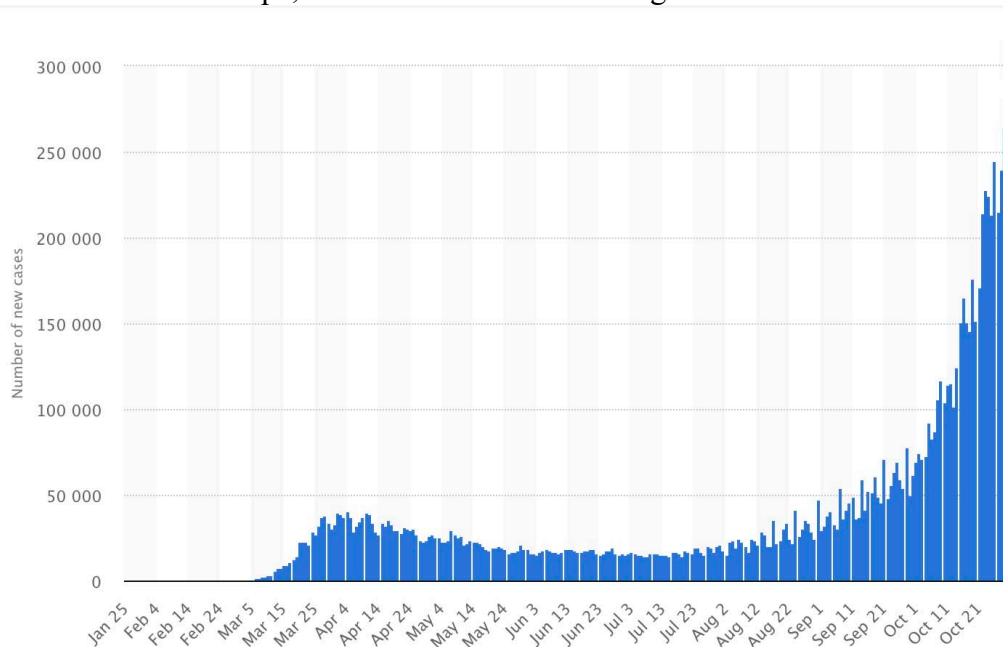


When I last wrote you a month ago, the United States was averaging 40,000 new cases of COVID-19 a day, what I called in my letter a scary new normal. That's a lot of people getting infected each day for the "*roaring success*" President Trump was claiming. Dr. Fauci said on Facebook that same day that "*We are still knee-deep in the first wave of this.*" As is always the case with this carefully-worded man, it is important to pay attention to exactly what he is saying. The FIRST wave? He was reminding us that, like flu, coronaviruses are seasonal, with peak infections in October-November. The initial wave of COVID-19 infections we saw in the Spring of 2020 (and the summer "surge" that followed when we relaxed restrictions too early) was just the first wave. The main event, Dr. Fauci was reminding us, is yet to come.

Europe Leads the Way

And now it has. In Europe, fall weather arrives a month earlier than in the United States (it's a lot further North). The air is dryer in the fall, so infectious virus particles persist longer in the air, and the weather is colder, so people gather indoors more often, where they share the same air. For these reasons respiratory viruses like the flu flare up in the fall, as do the coronaviruses that cause the common cold. Now, as Dr. Fauci feared, so has the second wave of COVID-19.

All thru the long days of this last summer, the number of daily new cases of COVID-19 being reported in Europe has hovered around 20,000, about half of what we were seeing in the United States. Then, towards the end of August, the European numbers began to rise. In the weeks that followed, they have exploded. After two months, there were ten times as many people being infected and infecting others! On October 31, there were 264,000 new cases of COVID-19 reported THAT DAY in Europe, with the numbers still rising:



Adhering to much stricter commercial and school lockdowns, coupled with mandatory safety precautions like face masks and restricted public movement, Europe had avoided the summer surge the United States experienced. But with this grim resurgence Germany, France, Great Britain, Belgium and Greece are all once again locking down tight. No country wants to do this, as the economic, social and political costs will be high, but absent swift and Draconian measures, Europe will soon be looking at half-a-million new COVID-19 infections each day. Every day. Remember, girls, 2.5% of those infected with COVID-19 die as a result. That's 1,250 Europeans to be killed by the virus each day, day in and day out, absent a lockdown.

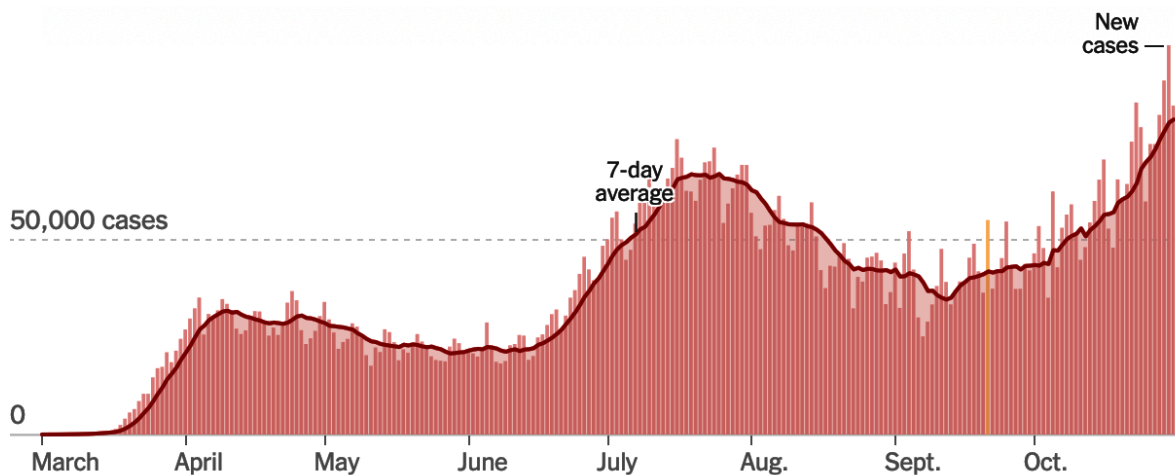
You girls should note a key point hidden within Dr. Fauci's comment: The arriving fall wave of respiratory virus infections is seasonal, and not to be avoided. The Europeans in general have done a far better job than we have at mitigating the spread of COVID-19 within communities, but they can't turn back the weather. Nor can any of these countries stay shut down indefinitely. When all is said and done, the only solution available to them this winter will be universal testing. Every person. Then contact tracing and isolation of all positives for two weeks. China has had great success with massive testing. It is very hard, but it does work. I'm not an expert, but I don't see any other way.



Over the last few months I have written to you girls about several rapid tests for COVID-19, some more reliable than others. I have no doubt that production of one or more of these tests could be ramped up with strong governmental support, and quickly applied to a large portion of a country's population. With the pandemic raging, this would seem a no-brainer.

The United States Is Following the Same Path

Fall weather has come to the United States during the month of October while I was visiting my granddaughter, and so has the fall wave of COVID-19. Look at the month of October:



The populations of Europe and the United States are nearly identical (the population of the five European countries is 343 million, the United States 331 million) and as I see it we are following right in Europe's footsteps -- only, like the weather, a month later. As I write this, the number of newly-reported COVID-19 cases in the United States has grown in one month from 40,000 a day to surpassing a hundred thousand a day (A HUNDRED THOUSAND A DAY!) and the numbers are still rising. We added a million cases in just the last two weeks. As sure as winter is coming, we are looking at several hundred thousand new COVID-19 infections each day in the United States by Thanksgiving, with no top yet in sight. Scary.

So Where Does This Leave Us?

Which doesn't mean we have to stand around and do nothing while awaiting a vaccine, as our federal government has seemed to be advocating. I am sure a vaccine of some sort will be coming within the next few months. But delivery is another matter. I suspect our family is the better part of a year away from actually receiving a vaccine, and when we do it is likely that the vaccine will be only partially effective (the federal benchmark is 50% effective; I am quietly hoping for 70%, but regard that as a long shot). So this fall and winter we are on our own. Face masks whenever we go out anywhere, even down the block to walk the dog. No family gatherings at Thanksgiving or Christmas. No hugging close friends, shaking hands with or kissing anyone. No grocery shopping (call and have delivered -- no exceptions). No trips to the barber or hairdresser, or anywhere where people gather. No political rallies, movies, or theater, and church only if socially distanced. In other words, we must ourselves lock down. Now.

Actually, all three of you girls are pretty far along the road now. As I saw these last four weeks in Atlanta, Susie has her household firmly locked down in just this way. She is fiercely protective of little Jed, and will not let anyone approach her or enter the house. Even delivered groceries wait outside until they can be cleaned off. Nikki and Matt in NYC watch carefully how they travel thru the city. They are trying to figure a way to visit us in Saint Louis without exposing themselves or us to danger of infection. Not a simple proposition, but hopefully doable. Caitlin will visit us, but will quarantine in an apartment in the Central West End for ten days before coming home, just as Nikki did a few months ago. Now it is your mother and I who are carefully re-ordering our household to better protect ourselves and the pooch from any danger of COVID-19 infection.

This is when push comes to shove, girls. The danger of infection will grow exponentially this winter, and ignoring the danger as President Trump recommends will not make us safe. Caution will.

With today's presidential election, we can hope next year for a concerted federal effort to expand testing to include everyone in the United States, regardless of symptoms or their lack, regardless of any one person's willingness to participate, regardless of the cost. In a country as politically divided as ours is today, a country-wide effort like this isn't going to be easy to pull off. However, as many, many more become infected, we can hope that necessity may drive acceptance.

In the meantime, we hunker down as a family. Your mother and I love you to the moon and back. Stay safe.

Dad