

***Why You Should Now Care Even More About Global Health!!!***  
**Children's National Medical Center**  
**March 16, 2021**

**The Aims of Today's Talk**

Last year, I gave a talk in Sarasota called “*Why one should care about global health.*” I suggested a number of reasons why global health should be so important to all of us. Sadly, too much of what I talked about turned out to be true and the Sarasota World Affairs Council invited me back recently for a one-year post-mortem. The organizer of this meeting has asked me to build on my earlier remarks and comment today on why I think it is so important to “care even more NOW about global health.” So, I would like to make 20 minutes of remarks on this question and then open up for questions and answers from the audience.

**Why is Global Health So Important?**

In my book and my teaching, I suggest a number of reasons why global health should be important to everyone, everywhere, all the time:

- First, diseases don't respect boundaries and globalization has increased the speed with which diseases can spread across boundaries. Just look at HIV, SARS, MERS, zika, dengue, west Nile and COVID-19.
- Second, there is an ethical dimension to health and well-being, wherever you are. Five million children under five years of age die in the world every year, almost all of preventable causes. Is this acceptable, when we know well what could be done to prevent such deaths? There are substantial variances in many countries in access to water, sanitation, food security and health services by ethnicity. Is it ethical for countries to perpetuate the lack of services for their minority people?
- Third, health is closely linked with economic and social development in an increasingly interdependent world. Unhealthy children don't thrive, don't succeed in school, and don't become productive adults. Another example of this link is HIV, which has had an enormous economic and social impact on a range of societies. It led, for example, to a large number of deaths in many countries, the creation of “AIDS orphans,” and the continuing cost of keeping people on anti-retroviral therapy.
- Fourth, the health and well-being of people everywhere has important links with security and freedom. Outbreaks of plague, cholera, SARS, and Ebola had overwhelming and sometimes unbearable economic costs on a number of countries. What are the long-term implications for societies in which a large share of the population is overweight or obese and a growing share of people have diabetes?

- Finally, global health problems, by definition, cannot be solved by unilateral actions within countries. Rather, they require cooperative actions across countries. This is true of efforts to deal with annual influenza outbreaks, share knowledge of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases, and eradicate polio, for example. Cooperation is also needed for the development and distribution of new diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. It is also needed for efforts to take on the tobacco companies and reduce tobacco consumption.

So, if these truths are self-evident, as Thomas Jefferson might have said!!!, why are they even more true and more important to embrace now than before?

To answer this question, let's look through the prism of COVID-19 at the points that I raised above.

- When it comes to the interdependent boundaryless world in which we live, I like to say that “the health of anyone, anywhere, is the health of everyone, everywhere.”

COVID highlights this in exceptional ways. The disease appears to have begun in China. It then spread to other countries. It spread to the US, apparently from China and other countries, such as Italy. Today, the virus is nearly universal.

In addition, viruses mutate. A number of prominent mutations of this virus have already occurred and begun to spread widely, including those first discovered in the UK, South Africa, and Brazil. This has happened, of course, despite many lockdowns and extensive barriers to travel.

- This virus has also highlighted a number of ethical issues, in a manner unseen perhaps since the early days of HIV.

First have been the ethics of travel bans. Next is the ethics of lockdowns. Then, there are issues related to mandatory mask wearing. After that, there are a range of ethical issues that relate to prioritization for vaccination both within and across countries. On the clinical side, there is a range of ethical questions related to crisis standards of care. COVID-19 has also highlighted issues of health equity, as minority groups die at much higher rates than majority groups but usually have less access to care and to vaccination than the better-off groups.

- I don't know if this virus will stop countries from moving from complacency to panic in the face of every emerging disease. However, the economic costs of this disease have been beyond measure at every level and if this does not wake people and countries up, I am not sure what will.

Let's make it simple – the economic crisis that confronts many countries and the globe right now originates in a public health crisis. People have not stopped flying because planes are crashing. They have not stopped traveling because there is no place nice to go. They have not stopped dining in restaurants because the food is bad. They are not working at home because this has been everyone's preferred way to work. NO!!!!!! They have changed their behaviors because of a virus that some countries allowed to get out of control. People will not resume normal economic activity until the virus is controlled.

The costs of the virus have been unbearable for many families. They have lost their loved ones, their jobs, and their incomes. They have been at risk of losing basic services and their homes. By the end of 2020, about 500,000 people had died in the US from COVID. This is as many as died in WWII. Globally, almost 2.7 million people have now died from COVID-19.

At the community level, there has been a loss of tax revenues and in many places, a loss of businesses, as well.

Many countries have also seen their national economic product shrink more than any time since the great depression. In one quarter of 2020, in fact, the US GDP declined by 9%, which was three times the largest decline since record keeping began in 1947. COVID-19 also wiped out 113 straight months of job growth in the US.

So, let me repeat: this is a public health crisis that reflects daily the wide-ranging impact of a pandemic and the costs of failing to control it while there was a chance to do so.

- COVID has also raised an array of questions about “security and freedom.”

Children have suffered greatly from the lack of in-person schooling and for many, the lack of schooling, at all. What does this mean for their future and the future of their countries?

People have neglected needed health care. What will this mean for their future and the future costs of caring for them?

The virus has become as much a political, as a scientific matter. Mask wearing is a political issue in many places. Social distancing is also seen in some places as an infringement on civil rights. Important segments of different populations do not wish to be immunized, often because they refuse to recognize the importance and virulence of the disease.

All of this might seem normal in the US, where behaviors often reflect the political divide. However, we have people in the UK who think COVID is spread through 5G and recently in the Netherlands there have been protests against mask wearing and lockdowns, despite the traditions there of “orderliness”.

Moreover, COVID has often brought out the ugliness of unilateralism and vaccine nationalism, rather than multilateralism and cooperation. I am not sure, “shall we say,” how good this will be for world security and freedom.

- Lastly, COVID has highlighted the need to work globally on a number of health issues and the dangers and costs of failing to do so.

One part of the US failure to control COVID relates to the US unwillingness to cooperate in the use of tests developed elsewhere. WHO had already approved tests for the virus, but the US decided to develop its own test. That turned out to be fraught with problems and delays, which were instrumental in helping the virus gain a foothold in the US.

In addition, there has been a worldwide free-for-all on the purchase of PPEs.

The US also briefly left WHO, accusing it of being a pawn of the Chinese.

Vaccine nationalism, as I mentioned, is rife but counterproductive - if you believe that we are all at risk, as long as the virus is circulating in other countries.

### **So, What Then DOES COVID say about Global Health?**

Let me end by hoping that I have convinced you of why everyone of us must now care about global health – even more than before.

Let me also also end by suggesting a few lessons that emerge from this important point:

- We and the world need to prepare now for the next pandemic. Such preparation must be ethical, equitable, and universal in scope. It must include, for example, advance market commitments on PPEs, diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. It must also include arrangements in advance for the access of low- and middle-income countries to diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines at the same time as they are made available to high-income countries. Arrangements like COVAX need to be put in place now for the next pandemic. These must include agreements on patents, licensing, and tiered pricing that will ensure timely and universal access to all countries.
- Many countries need to urgently strengthen their own public health capacity. The US needs to do this at every level. Local public health authorities have lost tens of thousands of staff over the last decade and CDC has to rebuild itself from the rubble.
- COVID-19 has led to an increase in non-COVID mortality in many countries, as people delayed or failed to seek care for acute and chronic conditions. Almost all countries need

to prepare their health systems for more continued, effective and efficient operation during a pandemic.

- We need a strong and well-financed WHO, staffed to lead the world's work on pandemic preparedness and response, and whose financing is not tied up in donor-financed trust funds. There also has to be a universal mechanism for dealing with non-compliance with the International Health Regulations.
- We also need to own up and act *now* on other threats that could bury us, such as anti-microbial resistance – and which may have been made worse by this virus.