

“Why You Should Now Care Even More About Global Health!!!”
Sarasota, December 7 – 430 pm MST

Intro

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to speak with you tonight.

This is a special honor, of course, since one usually does not get invited back to where one spoke earlier!! Perhaps, if I speak well tonight, we can make this into the annual Skolnik Lecture for the Sarasota World Affairs Council!!

The aims of tonight’s talk

Last year, I gave a talk 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. One of them was the risks posed by emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. I specifically noted that the world was poorly prepared to deal with such diseases, which have always emerged and will continue to do so. I also stressed that the world could face a catastrophe if countries failed to urgently improve their capacity for pandemic surveillance and response.

As the organizers have requested, I would like to now make some remarks about what has happened to the world in the last year, why the virus has struck such a terrible blow to the US, and what this means for how much you should care about global health now. I will also make some suggestions about how the US can more effectively address this pandemic and better prepare for future outbreaks. I shall end, as requested, with some thoughts on some immediate global health challenges I think we will face besides COVID-19.

So, what happened?

Since my talk last year, 67 million people globally have been infected with COVID-19 and 1.5 million people have died of it.

Since my talk last year, 14.8 million people have been infected with COVID-19 in the US and 282,000 people have died of it.

In the last month or so, as you know, we have had a terrible surge of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, both in the US and in many other countries.

Linked to this, we have a much greater risk of being infected and dying than in many of our peer countries and even including many countries that are much poorer. The risk of being infected with COVID-19 is about 50 times greater in the US than in S. Korea. The risk of dying from COVID-19 is almost 80 times greater in the US than in S. Korea.

How did this happen in the US?

It is true that the Chinese failed to transparently provide in a timely manner all of the information they had about an emerging infectious disease.

However, I can't accept this as an excuse for America's failures to suppress the virus. A number of countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, S. Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, for example, had the same information that we had but still managed to suppress the virus and largely keep it suppressed.

In addition, many who worked on global health, such as Bill Gates and others, predicted for years that this would happen.

The short answer to what happened is that we failed to take needed and well-known public health measures in a timely manner. The virus then overran us to the point where most places could not keep up with it and stopped trying to engage in good public health work.

Drilling down a bit

I want to suggest several reasons for why the virus has so badly defeated us. My comments overwhelmingly refer to the federal government, but many state governments also have nothing to brag about in their response to the virus:

Weak and slow response

- The federal government ignored early information about the outbreak and was very slow to respond to it
- The administration was very reluctant to invoke the Defense Production Act, even as there were major shortages of PPEs
- The federal government left most procurement of needed equipment and supplies to a free for all among the states
- The quality of the response to the virus varied dramatically across states

Poor quality messaging, the politicization of the outbreak and the muzzling of science

- *The federal government's messaging and that of many states, as well, was late, inconsistent, often scientifically wrong, and frequently polarizing*
- *The federal government politicized the outbreak and put politics over science*

The decimation of CDC

- *CDC made some early mistakes and the administration then sidelined CDC*
- *CDC's own work on this was fraught with poor quality responses*
- *The CDC director showed a complete lack of integrity*

Failure to seek suppression of the virus

- The federal government for months has basically sought to achieve herd immunity through infection and put all of its other efforts into vaccines

So, where is the virus going?

There is every indication that the number of infections and deaths will continue to increase in the coming months, fueled by fatigue, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and inappropriate policy choices at both the federal and state level. We will not be able to suppress the virus anytime soon.

So, why should you care about global health even more than before???

I mentioned last year the importance of a healthy population to a society's overall social and economic well-being. COVID-19, however, has made much clearer the centrality of public health, not only to our health, but also to the economy, to education, to people's mental state, and more. Larry Summers estimated some months ago that the US had already spent \$16 trillion on COVID-19. I can't think of a US investment that would pay a higher rate of return than investing broadly in public health, disease surveillance, pandemic response and the development of the kinds of personnel needed to carry out first class public health efforts in the face of a disease outbreak. Policy makers have not understood well enough that we must suppress the virus to restore the economy. US leadership has failed to understand that until countries achieve herd immunity through vaccination that the presence of the virus in any country poses a threat to the health of people in every other country.

So, what can we do?

My guess is that the President will ignore the virus, that much of the Trump administration will focus on vaccines, but that CDC will begin to speak up, as if it actually had a voice. Drs. Fauci and Birx will also speak up more.

My guess is that we will make some progress on vaccines before inauguration, but not as much as the administration promised and not as much as the UK.

Rather, most of the work in addressing the outbreak will fall to the Biden administration. There are a lot of smart people working with him and a strong likelihood that Biden will listen to them.

However, you asked for my views! So, if the new President asked for my advice!!! This is what I would suggest his administration do, starting on Day 1:

Messaging

- *Engage in consistent and clear messaging, based on science, which focuses on actions needed now and on creating more confidence in government messaging.*
- *Use tougher ads more like what we used for tobacco than the Mr. Rogers approach to information, which is being used now. People need to see video of intubated COVID patients in S. Dakota and Iowa, as they lay dying.*

Diagnostics, drugs, and vaccines

- Strengthen the coordination and transparency of Operation Warp Speed to be sure that vaccine development continues urgently ... so that better and more cost-effective vaccines that are easier to store and distribute will be produced and made available at affordable prices.
- Ensure that any decisions on diagnostics, drugs, and vaccines are made solely on the basis of evidence and transparently communicated to the public.
- Join COVAX and do what the US can to get vaccines distributed globally at affordable prices.

CDC

- Replace the CDC Director with a well-regarded person of exceptional managerial competence who can help, as an urgent priority, to resurrect the CDC – as President-Elect Biden made clear yesterday he was doing.

Specific Measures to Fight COVID

- Enact a mask mandate for federal facilities.
- Invoke the DPA to produce PPEs and tests and enter into advance market commitments for other items.
- Promote more selective and fair lockdowns when needed by focusing on what the epi says, based on the premise that schools are essential and that we need to do everything possible to keep them open in safe ways.
- Launch a universal test program, along the lines recommended by Professor Mina at Harvard. This would focus on repeated at-home testing with inexpensive tests that get

mailed to everyone over and over again, until we have suppressed the virus. This would be coupled with financial incentives for isolation and quarantine and greatly enhanced backwards and forward contact tracing.

Global Cooperation

- Rejoin WHO but seek ways to help WHO get over its “sovereignty burden”

The Next Pandemic

- Prepare for the next pandemic, as if it could occur anytime, since it will occur soon enough!!! This must include advance market commitments, strengthening the supply chain, etc.
- Preparation must also include strengthening public health capacity by providing support for state and local authorities and passing an act like the old Defense Foreign Language Act, that would incentivize people to go into public health work and incentivize states and municipalities to dramatically strengthen their public health capacity.
- Preparation must also include returning a global health portfolio to the NSC

What else will the new president have to worry about?

The above agenda is urgent and extensive enough.

Nonetheless, the president will face a number of other global health challenges that will also be urgent. Among the most urgent will be:

- Helping low- and middle-income countries restore their programs for maternal and child health, childhood vaccines, and the global program to eradicate polio. High income countries cannot return to normal life if low-income countries continue to face the virus and are moving backwards, rather than forwards, in improving the health of their people.
- We and the world also need to urgently tackle the threats of anti-microbial resistance, which could also bury us – literally.
- The President-elect has also made clear that he understands the impact of climate change on human health and well-being and will make this another immediate priority, which I comment.

Thanks!!

Thank you very much for another opportunity to meet with you and learn from you. I hope I have helped you to understand the costs of failing to pay sufficient attention to critical issues in global health and why we should care even more than I suggested last year.