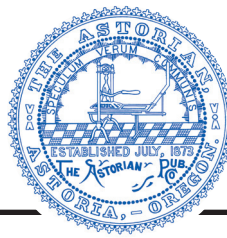


OPINION



the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

'The coronavirus is preventable'

Michael McNickle is Clatsop County's point person on the coronavirus.

As the public health director, he has been working with Ellen Heinitz, a naturopathic physician and the county's community health project manager, to help prepare for a potential outbreak.

With 14 of the 15 deaths from COVID-19 in the United States so far from Washington state, and the North Coast a tourist destination, the threat from the virus has unnerved many residents.

McNickle has sought to calm fears. "The coronavirus is preventable," he said. "If you follow good personal hygiene, social distancing, make sure you keep your hands from your face and mouth as much as possible, and — if you are sick — please stay home."

In an interview on Thursday, McNickle talked about risk, the potential spread of the virus from cruise ships and the importance of relying on science-based sources — and not social media — for information.

Q: What is the most important thing people should know?

A: As of right now, we have no cases of coronavirus in Clatsop County. That's probably the most important thing.

Secondarily, is that the coronavirus is preventable. If you follow good personal hygiene, social distancing, make sure you keep your hands from your face and mouth as much as possible, and — if you are sick — please stay home. That's a great take-home message.

And also, if you are sick, call your provider first and talk to them about what you can do and make sure that you go through your symptoms. That's what your primary care provider is for.

Q: Is there testing available now in the county if I do call my provider?

A: The coronavirus test is not available, unless you meet specific criteria that's put out by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and Oregon Health Authority.

Those include going to the primary care provider. You have to have certain things wrong with you — high fever, you're showing shortness of breath, you have some signs of pneumonia — and



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Michael McNickle is the Clatsop County public health director.

those kind of things. Your provider can do those tests.

And you have to have a viral panel to make sure you don't have any other viruses, because it could still be influenza A, which is still in our county. So we need to eliminate all of those things before we go to the next step.

Q: Is there any specific outreach being done to care homes for the elderly?

A: Yes. Every Wednesday at 3 p.m. we have a call with all of the providers, like NorthWest Senior and Disability Services, all those care centers.

We call in and we gather information — and we share that. For about an hour, we answer their questions, making sure that we provide them with the most up to date and accurate information we can.

Q: Given Astoria is a port city and the North Coast is a tourist destination, aren't we at greater risk than, say, if we were in Vernonia?

A: The answer is that if they're coming from a cruise ship, that the Coast Guard would handle that ...

So they are the ones who would actually do all the work for all the cruise ships and cargo ships, because they have all of the authority on the maritime side.

And so if they get a case, they would, of course, notify OHA (Oregon Health Authority), who then notifies us, and then we notify everyone.

Q: But we're a tourist destination beyond the water. Hundreds of people come here for events ...

A: Again, it's about good hygiene. We recommend people — if you are sick, please don't come to our events. You should stay home. Get well. Talk to your provider if you're really sick.

The same thing with mass gatherings or other social events. If you're the one who's sick, don't go. Just stay home. Take care of yourself. Your wellness is more important than that event. And then you can't spread — even if it isn't coronavirus, you could be spreading something else.

So we don't want to have that. We're working closely with all the places that have natural mass gatherings, like our schools, the care centers, the hospitals. And we have protocols in place for them to deal with that.

Q: Why shouldn't we be worried, though, about thousands of people coming to Astoria on cruise ships?

A: Because the Coast Guard won't allow them to port if they have any illnesses.

By law, those ships have to report any illness on those ships to the Coast Guard. So, before they even get to Astoria, they'd be parked out there somewhere, and the Coast Guard would go deal with it.

They would talk to their medical staff on the cruise ships, see what's going

CORONAVIRUS

Updates on COVID-19 are available online from state and federal public health officials.

• Oregon Health Authority: bit.ly/3czVP8u

• Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: bit.ly/38ulxlg

on, and then they'd be able to decide where they're going to go and how they're going to do things. Kind of like what's happening in San Francisco right now (with the Grand Princess). They're not allowed to disembark until they're cleared by the Coast Guard.

Q: Some people have been critical of your comments last week comparing the virus to the flu and discounting information on social media. What do you say to them?

A: I say about social media, is that if you really want accurate information, you go to the source that understands it and has science-based information.

I would highly recommend people go to Oregon Health Authority — they have an excellent webpage on the coronavirus — as does the CDC, in very clear, layman's terms about the top 5 things you need to know about coronavirus. And it's excellent.

Facebook and other sources may also have that information, but the likelihood of there being some twist in that is a possibility. So we really, in my opinion, always go to the source of the best information.

Q: But comparing it to the flu, do you still believe that it's no worse?

A: So if you have comorbidity — if you have, like, diabetes or COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) or some other underlying effect — it's just like the flu, also, because those folks die from the flu every year, too.

In fact, we had a couple patients just this past weekend die of influenza A, and they were all comorbidity.

So that's the key take-home, is that if you are (otherwise healthy) with a good immune system, you may have mild to moderate symptoms. If you have comorbidity, and you have some ongoing chronic illnesses, you're more at risk.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Quarantine cruise ships

There is a new coronavirus that we are all susceptible to. It has caused the near pandemic COVID-19. There is no vaccine or cure, so science holds that a significant number of people will become infected prior to its decline to endemic levels.

Our greatest duty is to stop the arrival, and to slow the spread of the disease, by social actions that lower the effective reproductive rate to extinguish the virus and to prevent a large number of simultaneous cases.

Where the federal, state or county governments hesitate, the Public Health Service Act holds that it falls upon the "police powers" of municipal governments to issue orders of quarantine and isolation, like San Francisco did during the Spanish flu.

Because of the inevitable pandemic, Astoria has a duty to order the quarantine of all scheduled cruise ships, preventing disembarkation, until they certify that they don't carry any infected passengers or crew.

Worried about the cost? Consider that an outbreak will cancel all our events, close schools, churches, theaters and bars. It will also overwhelm our hospitals that don't have adequate tests, beds, or staff as it sickens and kills us.

Quarantine the cruise ships, while there is still time.

TED THOMAS
Astoria

A real threat

CCOVID-19 has me thinking about Astoria. It seems a real threat to my elderly friends there; particularly John Wedell, who's homeless and in his 70s.

This virus is a shadow that will largely pass over children, but still causes trepidation when I think of those in the community I know, and those I don't know.

I worry a bit for myself. The U.S. Navy left me susceptible to bronchial infections — I've a minor one now — but in these times my welfare's a tiny concern.

I read Laurie Garrett's "The Coming

Plague," sitting in Godfather's Books, decades ago. Then I believed intelligence, knowledge and goodwill could prevail in the U.S.; that we wouldn't repeat the monstrous mistakes of the past, like President Ronald Reagan's barring his surgeon general, C. Everett Koop, from making public statements regarding the emerging AIDS epidemic.

But we've a president who stokes irrational fears and prejudices, exploits crises for political gain, rejects science and even facts, and whose ego demands the praise of that of a demigod.

Yes, I think about Astoria, at this moment, and know I've strongly disagreed with the actions and mindset of its leaders, often. I believed that the city does have a social service role to play; as a moral prerequisite. However, they and most all the others who serve Astoria, do have good hearts and minds, and can be relied on, in a crisis, to act like a bunch of damn socialists! Thank God!

Stay well and be kind.

MICHAEL A. "SASHA" MILLER
Salem

Concerned

Iwas concerned to see a quote from Michael McNickle, Clatsop County's public health director, stating that "We want to reduce the fear, because (COVID-19) is not worse than any flu you see normally" ("County cautions against panic on coronavirus," The Astorian, Feb. 29). Reducing fear and anxiety is a wonderful goal, but this statement significantly oversimplifies the situation.

In the New England Journal of Medicine, two members of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention write that if we take into consideration the possibility of many undiagnosed, asymptomatic cases, COVID-19 may have a fatality rate of "considerably less than 1%," and that "this suggests that the overall clinical consequences of COVID-19 may ultimately be more akin to those of a severe seasonal influenza (which has a case fatality rate of approximately 0.1%) ... rather than a dis-



ease similar to SARS or MERS, which have had case fatality rates of 9% to 10% and 36%, respectively."

We should definitely hope that the virus has a lower fatality rate than initially expected, but we should also be more than usually vigilant about protecting the health of our community members — especially for the senior citizens, folks with chronic health conditions, and health care workers who are at the greatest risk.

For this reason, I'd like to call on our local business leaders to consider ways of easing sick leave for employees if we begin to see community spread in the area. Everybody else ... keep calm, but please wash your hands.

ERIN KISSANE
Astoria

Epidemic deja vu

Awalk through any cemetery within 50 miles of Astoria will reveal many children's graves dating from 1919, 1920 and 1921.

These were the result of the 1918 influenza epidemic brought to America by soldiers returning from World War I. They came home in ships which turned every port city into infected hubs. Astoria became a hot spot.

Today, cruise ships are known to be the perfect incubator for any virus. The passengers, who travel from all parts of the world, must first pass through several airports to reach the ship where, once aboard, they mingle inside a warm capsule with recirculated air.

Worse yet are the famous buffets, where passengers are presented with an extraordinary array of food. The endless portions of hams, melons, cheese and fruit tantalize everyone because each passenger serves themselves until their plate is full. Unfortunately, the serving tongs for each plate are shared by everyone who follows. One sneeze from a sick passenger can be spread to every unsuspecting person who touches the same utensils.

So little is known about the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, most scientists and other intellectuals have canceled their upcoming conferences.

We should encourage our local hospital directors and city government to uninvite the coming fleet of cruise ships. Astoria is not an essential port.

Ships brought the deadly influenza here 100 years ago, and it would be inexcusable if our local leadership allowed a repeat. Cruise ships should stay away this year.

REX ZIAK
Naselle, Washington