

EAST OREGONIAN OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Virus has us in uncharted territory

For those of us keeping up with current events, there has been a whirlwind of dramatic developments over the last few days as governments at every level, national sports leagues, state and local officials have begun canceling events and gatherings out of fear of spreading COVID-19, or coronavirus.

According to World Health Organization, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside of China increased 13 fold in the last two weeks. As of Wednesday, there were more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries and 4,291 people had died from the disease with thousands more who have been hospitalized. The numbers have only grown since and now those infected include famous actor Tom Hanks and his wife.

The proverbial dominos began toppling in the U.S. Wednesday night after an NBA player was confirmed to have contracted the virus. The game that he was scheduled to play in was summarily canceled before tipoff, leading to what seemed like a chain reaction. The league promptly suspended its season until further notice. In short order, universities, athletic conferences and the NCAA itself began canceling games and tournaments that already begun. The NHL has followed suit and there was word Thursday morning that the MLB would also suspend operations.

In a speech to the nation, President Donald Trump announced a ban on travel to the U.S. from Europe. The administration and Congress are both weighing additional responses. On Thursday morning, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown banned large gatherings in the state. Major universities shifted to remote classes for 80,000 students and local schools were urged to cancel events. Now, several planned local gatherings are also being canceled and the newspaper is com-



Oregon Capital Bureau Photo/Jake Thomas
Gov. Kate Brown details steps Oregon is taking to limit the spread of COVID-19 at a press conference in Portland on Thursday.

puting a list. Even prep sports and outside school activities are being impacted.

It's a lot to take in. Is it an overreaction? Maybe. No one, not even the bravest of keyboard warriors on social media, can say with any certainty. Officials appear to be acting with an abundance of caution and a desire to do the right thing. This is clearly uncharted territory. And although some national media outlets may have sensationalized developments, many others are merely reporting the facts and doing their level best to provide the best possible information. Count us in. While we can all shake our heads and have a good laugh about panic buying of toilet paper, there is plenty of sobering news. The World Health Organization declared a "global pandemic" on Wednesday.

That's not a "hoax" or a partisan political conspiracy. It's real. In Oregon, state health officials on Wednesday announced that six more people had tested positive for COVID-19, including two residents at a veterans' nursing home in Lebanon. As of midweek, Oregon had recorded a total of 21 presumptive (meaning they tested positive in a state lab but haven't been confirmed by the CDC) and confirmed cases. That number will have likely increased as this editorial was being penned — state health officials warned on Thursday morning that Oregon's true number was likely somewhere between 150 and 200 cases.

Closer to home, Umatilla County's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

then a second presumptive case was identified. We take solace in the words of Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiurmar, "For most people's day-to-day life, the risk is still low." Indeed, it is for the benefit of protecting the most vulnerable among us — the elderly and those already suffering from underlying health conditions — that these precautions are being taken.

The disease has proven to be particularly deadly for this segment of society, in fact, many times more lethal than, say, influenza. Cancellation of events, restrictions on nursing home visits and other "social distancing" methods not only prevent some people from getting the virus altogether, it also helps "flatten the curve" of the pandemic, keeping serious cases spread out over time. Health officials have stressed that when viruses are left unchecked, the number of serious cases spikes rapidly, overwhelming a country's ventilators, intensive care unit beds and other resources needed to keep critically ill patients alive. The more slowly numbers build, the more time medical providers have to prepare.

Unfortunately, this particular coronavirus strain may just be getting started. It has only spread in the human population since December 2019. According to health officials, many of us may become infected and suffer only moderate or mild symptoms, or exhibit no symptoms at all. But for others, it may be a death sentence. We wish it were not so, but here we are. The *EO* will continue to provide readers with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible so that they can make informed decisions about their own behaviors and potential risks involved.

Ultimately, we are all responsible for our own health and well-being.

OTHER VIEWS

Compassion in the time of coronavirus

Editor's note: Do you have a point you'd like to make or an issue you feel strongly about? Submit a letter to the editor or a guest column.

Citizens of democracies can scarcely fathom the extreme, but effective, social controls China has imposed in response to the coronavirus outbreak. But now we are seeing variations on China's large-scale quarantines and travel restrictions in Italy, Israel and elsewhere. Such measures are certainly under consideration in many other countries. On Tuesday, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo deployed the state's National Guard to establish a 1-mile containment zone in New Rochelle, a suburb of the nation's most populous city.

A debate is raging in the United States about where to draw the line between individual freedoms and social responsibilities.

But just as the coronavirus' spread has forced us to consider suppressing our democratic impulses, it also calls on us to suppress our profoundly human and evolutionarily hard-wired impulses for connection: seeing our friends, getting together in groups or touching each other. Even spouses in the same household are implausibly advised to stay physically distant if one of them is sick. None of this comes naturally to us, nor is it easy. In my case, since I have spent much of my professional career studying marriage, friendship and social networks, and the health benefits they offer, I am finding it ironic to be strongly advising against human contact — but that's what I'm doing.

We are being asked to do all this to protect the greater good. If we limit social contact, we can "flatten" the coronavirus epidemic by spread-

ing out the same number of cases across a longer time horizon. That way, we will have fewer sick people at any given point, allowing health care systems and supply chains to provide precious resources, such as ventilators, beds for intensive-care units and, of course, medical staff.

But even in the midst of social distancing, which is so unnatural to our species, we humans have other useful, innate capacities that the virus will allow us to retain, even as we strive to reduce face-to-face contact. And we can use these natural proclivities as weapons, too. These innate capacities include our impulse to cooperate and our ability to deliberately teach each other useful things (a defining trait of our species that is exceedingly rare in the animal kingdom).

The complicated agenda we face is that, in this time of a possible pandemic, just as we are supposed to distance ourselves, we must also band together. Pandemics are an especially demanding test of our ability to cooperate because we are trying to protect not just people we know but also people we do not know (or even, possibly, care about). When we avoid meetings, decline to shake hands or pull our kids from school, we are showing compassion to innumerable faceless other people, because we are interrupting possible chains of contagion that might pass through us, whether we ourselves get sick or not.

We will also be called upon to help those among us who are most vulnerable and least appreciated — the elderly, the homeless, the chronically ill, the institutionalized. And health care workers will be expected to take personal risks of getting sick or even dying so they can care for others. But again, when a disease is spreading, helping others also helps ourselves, by helping to eradicate

reservoirs of infection and stopping transmission.

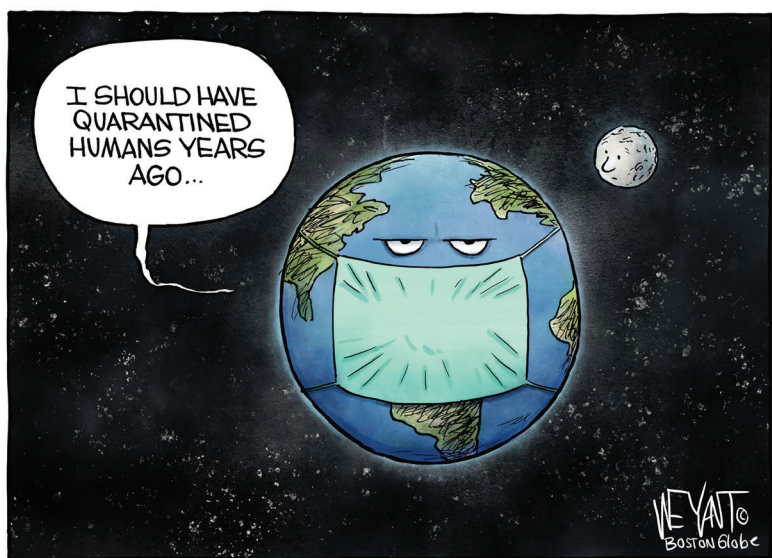
Our species' evolved capacity for teaching can also help combat the virus. The openness and speed with which scientists, experts and officials around the world have shared information have been amazing. Websites based on shared data are now being updated daily with genetic analyses or epidemiological information about the coronavirus. And in an effort reminiscent of converting factories to munitions production during World War II, many scientists (including those in my lab) have shifted from their usual work and are redirecting to efforts that might help with the coronavirus, and they are rapidly posting their discoveries online before official publication for all to see.

The human desire to teach each other is further abetted by scientific journals — such as *Nature*, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Lancet* — that are implementing special fast-track procedures to review and publish results about the coronavirus.

The way the virus affects us and the way we are responding ironically illustrate another profound aspect of human evolution. Part of the reason humans are social in the first place is to learn from each other, to share knowledge. Indeed, the spread of germs is the price we have had to pay for the spread of ideas. In the time of a pandemic, it's tempting to rely on baser instincts: fearmongering, selfishness and the suppression of information. But it's our innate goodness, in the form of cooperation and teaching, that will allow us to repel the invader.

Evolution has set us up for epidemics, but it has also endowed us with the tools to fight them.

Nicholas Christakis is a physician and sociologist and is the author of "Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society."



YOUR VIEWS

Love your children as much as you love your phone

I was recently at a local coffee shop when a mother and her small child entered. Having worked in an early childhood program, I was looking forward to seeing them interact with each other.

The mother put her child in a high chair and placed several toys on the tray. Then she began looking at her phone. Not once did she even glance at her child.

Parents, children desperately need interaction with you. Do yourself and your child a favor by visiting www.circleofsecurityinternational.com. It provides wonderful information.

I believe today's young children are at risk and will pay the price for missing out on necessary, special, one-on-one time with parents. So, parents, love your children as much as you love your phone. Spend as much time with them as you do on your device.

**Darcia Throop
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