

3-6-20 COVID-19

At this time, March 2, 2020 there has been no official declaration that the Corona virus, now referred to as COVID-19 (corona virus disease 2019), has been declared a pandemic, meaning that the virus is spreading rapidly worldwide. It does appear to be a novel virus and whenever something is new, we have less immunity to it, and so, therefore, it spreads more quickly and there are fatal cases.

What I do know is that the Massachusetts State Public Health laboratories are now approved for testing for this new virus. When physicians see symptoms that could represent the COVID-19 virus, such as fever and low respiratory symptoms such as cough and or difficulty breathing, they can request a test kit for the COVID-19 virus. Any medical facility I have been in in recent weeks all had signs up asking to let them know if you had recently traveled to China. Those statements have been removed as this virus has spread to other countries. Many airports are screening for the virus, so the people who appear to be sick can be isolated and tested and treated.

I have great faith in our Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and the Centers for Disease Control. For decades they have been telling us “It is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when”, referring to a deadly pandemic as this country saw in 1918. In addition to tabletop exercises and plans for responding to a pandemic, we also have behind us the real experiences of H1N1 and SARS.

I think the great lesson that played out in Canada dealing with SARS was that when good communication is delivered, most people cooperate. People paid attention to the hygiene lessons. When many individuals and families were ordered into isolation of the sick and quarantine of those who had been in contact with the sick, most of them cooperated. Only a handful refused, insisting that they be able to go out into the public and to go to work. After contacting those families and having one-on-one communications, stressing the importance of their cooperation to save not only their own life and their families but their whole communities, all but one cooperated. That one person was going to be ordered by court and then he too realized the importance of the order and agreed to be quarantined. When working with thousands and even millions of people, to have

only a few requiring intense and direct work with only a handful of people to get complete cooperation is a very successful public health campaign in my book.

The H1N1 one clinics were a lot of work and they were successful. Fortunately, it did not become the pandemic that we feared, as seen in 1918, and we learned so much as to how to protect ourselves and our loved ones from spreading viruses like this. The lessons learned about prevention apply to the COVID-19 virus also.

Do you recall the 3 main measures?

One was social distancing. Viruses are spread through heavy droplets from coughing they go out 2 or 3 feet and land on the floor. So, when people stay about an arm's length away from others, they're protecting themselves.

The second lesson was cough etiquette. We retrained ourselves to cough into the elbow of our sleeves rather than the age-old method of coughing into our hand.

The 3rd protection measure was good hand washing. In addition to lathering up with warm water and soap and completely rinsing, it is also important to not undo that hygiene by then touching faucet handles and doorknobs. Even outside of flu season this also applies to food establishments. After washing your hands, use the paper towel to shut off the water and open the door. Then, lastly dispose of that paper towel. This is why we are starting to see wastebaskets closer to the exit door of bathrooms and at first, they couldn't understand why. The reason was H1N1 brought home the lesson of clean hands.

It is justified to also have with you an alcohol-based sanitizer and expect to see more of that available wherever you go.

This is a rapidly evolving situation. It will most likely soon be called a pandemic. Both now and then we have the lessons from the past to guide us: clean hands, clean surfaces that are frequently touched and good cough etiquette.

If you or anyone you know is exhibiting signs of fever and lower respiratory difficulties such as coughing or difficulty breathing, please contact your physician and talk to them about whether you should be tested for the COVID-19 virus.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax Massachusetts. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org

