

3-13-20 The importance of isolation and quarantine

Boards of health were given an incredible degree of authority from the start because of the seriousness and weight of their responsibilities. It is their charge to protect the public and the environment and sometimes that responsibility of protecting the many requires the very opposite of what we are accustomed to in this country. We are accustomed to upholding and protecting the freedom and rights of the individual. During public health emergencies, the rights of the individual may be secondary to the needs of many. The best example of this scenario is when a contagious illness requires boards of health to issue orders of Isolation and Quarantine. (A way to remember the difference is to keep in mind that the ill person is isolated (Both start with the letter "I"). Then the others, who may have been exposed, are quarantined in order to prevent further spread of the disease.

The order to isolate the ill protects others from getting the disease.

The order to quarantine protects not only that one person or family but potentially many others, as it stops the spread of the disease.

This is a very old practice known to succeed. Going back to the 14th century when ships were arriving in port with the plague, the ship used parts for isolating the sick and the whole ship's crew was quarantined. Food and water were safely delivered, and no one could leave the ship and go on land for forty days. This practice prevented the spread of plague to that city, potentially saving thousands of people.

All throughout the year, all over the country, quarantine is used by Animal Inspectors, such as our own Brian Kling. When a dog has been bitten by another, the biting dog is put under a 10-day quarantine. If at the end of the 10 days that dog is healthy it means the biting dog was not rabid. This practice is not just to save those animals; it also saves people, potentially many people and many other pets. If, on the other hand, the dog develops symptoms of illness it must be euthanized. However, there is still time to prophylactically protect people in contact with the animal if there had been any exposure.

In 2003 SARS reached Canada. At first, they didn't know what the disease was, so they called it according to what it appeared to be: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which became known as SARS.

After that outbreak I was very impressed by a description of how it was handled at the time, learned at a conference I was attending. Although they knew little about the disease, the period of contagion, or the method of it spreading, they did something very smart. They isolated the ill. Those who had been in contact with the ill, or could have been, were quarantined. At one-point 1000 people were quarantined and at another, 500 people were quarantined. Out of all those many families and towns and businesses where people were quarantined, only a handful refused. As I recall from the person involved in the SARS at the time, the small number was about 5. When Canada's public health people spoke to those people individually and explained the importance of this action, all but one complied. They were about to take one man to court to enforce the quarantine, when that person also agreed to comply because he then understood the importance. He arrived at the conclusion, as did the others, that saving many lives was more important than going to work, going out in public, expressing your freedom of movement and risking the possibility that others would die because of your freedom.

Eventually the severe acute respiratory syndrome was discovered to be a coronavirus. There are several and we now have one traveling around the world whenever it has the opportunity.

While yes, on the one hand, it is like our annual viral influenza. However, the death rate has passed that of our annual viral influenza. This happens when a new or novel virus appears to which people do not have immunity and it spreads like wildfire.

So, while we are at low risk in the United States and in Massachusetts of contracting the Covid-19 coronavirus, we are at high risk, as we are every year, of the annual viral influenza. It is not too late to get your vaccination for that. I hope that you will.

I see online many people panicking and I see others making fun of those who panic. It is not helpful or kind to make fun of anyone for their feelings and reactions. We should learn the facts.

While it is easy to say “only” 44 people died in Canada from SARS, it could have been thousands if isolation and quarantine had not been put into place.

We never know what a pandemic is going to do, as all these viruses are different. We're hoping that we can prevent the effects of the 1918 pandemic, which killed 50 million people worldwide including 675 thousand in the United States.

H1N1 In 2008 and 2009 was eventually called a pandemic. Fortunately, it did not end up being like the 1918 pandemic. However, people died from it. It was not as mild as was thought and those families who lost the 12, 469 to that virus do not feel fortunate at all.

We're supposed to know about the hand washing, the social distancing and the cough etiquette. We're supposed to use those precautions every year. Every year; not just this year.

You and your family can employ your own isolation in quarantine measures by not going to work when you're ill, especially with the flu, and staying in your own room away from your family members when you are.

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