

A Century of Contagion, A Time for Action

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This year is the 100th anniversary of the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918, which infected 500 million people worldwide and killed 50–100 million. This year, while not on the scale of 1918, is one of the worst flu seasons ever, with the flu vaccines having missed 90 percent of the active flu strains, thus being minimally effective. All around us, people are sick.

In 2014 I wrote a column strongly suggesting that folks wear face masks during flu season to protect themselves and others from contagion, as is routinely done in Japan and elsewhere in Asia. Unfortunately, very little has improved in our ability to prevent the spread of the viruses since I highlighted this problem. Doctor's offices do provide masks and ask visitors to wear them if they are coughing. And a few offices and stores provide hand sanitizer. But overall, we are taking none of the obvious and simple steps to prevent viral contagion.

I commute via CalTrain. Every day, in the enclosed, crowded and poorly ventilated train cars, many people are coughing and sneezing, sometimes into their hands, which then touch seats and handrails, and often just into the air. The train is essentially a moving bug box. No one, except me, wears a mask, and no one seems to be aware of the virus transmission that is going on, even though it's obvious that their colleagues and family members are getting sick.

The same is true of BART, MUNI and the other transportation systems in the Bay Area. And it's the case for office spaces and places of public assembly, including movie theaters, concert halls . . . and potentially The Commonwealth Club, where we have hand sanitizer and a supply of face masks at our front desk.

Why are people out and about when they are sick? The pressures of our Bay Area economy impel people to go to work even if they are sick. Missing a day of work may mean getting behind on a project in our very competitive economy.

Employers need to make it clear that employees can and should stay home if they are sick, working from home if they are able. The medical fact is that current flu strains are contagious for the first 5–7 days, including prior to being fully symptomatic, which recommends extreme caution. That is how long a flu sufferer must isolate himself or herself, either by staying away from other people or by using an effective mask and constantly washing or sanitizing their hands.

Curad, by the way, has developed an anti-virus mask—a step up from the common surgical mask—that is supposedly effective against 99.99 percent of flu viruses. They are readily available from Amazon,

office supply stores, Bed Bath and Beyond and some drugstores.

The spread of flu is very dangerous for the elderly, of which we have ever larger numbers in the Bay Area, for children and the immuno-compromised. A case of the flu can be fatal for these groups of people. Folks think I am a bit weird when I take my 94-year-old mom out to events, when I wave them away from hugging or kissing this charming and beautiful elderly lady, but a case of the flu at this point may mean pneumonia and worse for her.

So what is to be done?

It is time for a serious public health campaign about how to prevent the spread of flu viruses. I am amazed when I don't see information

about masking, hand washing and sanitizing; isolating oneself when sick; and avoiding hugging and hand-shaking and so on, inside of buses, trains and other public transport. I am astonished that most offices, stores and cultural centers don't provide masks and hand sanitizer.

The 100th anniversary of the greatest flu pandemic is a perfect time to stimulate practices here in the Bay Area like Japan's "mask culture," which started in 1918 and has grown in strength since then. County and city public health departments around the Bay Area, business associations, medical associations, foundations that focus on health and health care, university schools of public health and the media all have a responsibility to educate about preventing viral transmission and to take practical steps to implement the simple precautions that can be effective.

How about our public transit systems having public affairs messages on-board and in stations, and providing masks? What about an educational campaign on TV, radio, the Internet and in print media about how to prevent flu contagion? How about business associations urging businesses to have masks and hand sanitizer uniformly available?

The Bay Area often leads the nation in social and economic progress. Think what we can do to improve public health and the efficiency of our economy by addressing this problem. It's a no-brainer. Let's get it done!



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

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