

Facts — not fear — will stop the pandemic

BY JAY BHATTACHARYA AND CHRISTOS A. MAKRIDIS, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 12/03/20 02:30 PM EST
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The media relish negative news. “If it bleeds it leads” still holds, and perhaps it’s never been truer than in the COVID-19 era. Every day the news highlights the spread of the virus and tells the sad stories of some of its victims.

And yet, much of the media does not pay sufficient attention to the good news regarding improved treatments and survival of patients with the coronavirus. In contrast with the international media, the American press has been unrelentingly negative in its COVID coverage, even when there is good news to tell. That negativity is part of what fuels a culture of fear that affects local, state and federal politicians and the decisions they make.

But there is a lot of good news to tell. The case fatality rate from the virus has dropped sharply since March. The infection survival rate is 99.95 percent for people under 70 and 95 percent for people over 70. Hospitals are much better equipped to handle patients, with improved ventilator protocols, improved management of outpatients and new therapeutic strategies to provide relief and recoveries. Moreover, thanks to multiple ongoing clinical trials around the world, there may soon be a safe and effective vaccine.

By contrast with their focus on COVID deaths, the media have paid scant attention to the enormous medical and psychological harms from the lockdowns in use to slow the pandemic. Despite the enormous collateral damage lockdowns have caused, England, France, Germany, Spain and other European countries are all intensifying their lockdowns once again.

By lockdowns, we mean the all-too-familiar shuttered schools and universities, closed playgrounds and parks, silent churches and bankrupt stores and businesses that have become emblematic of American civic

life these past months. The relative dearth of reporting on the harms caused by lockdowns is odd, since lives lost from lockdown are no less important than lives lost from COVID infection. But they've received much less media attention.

The harms from lockdown have been catastrophic. Consider the psychological harm. Reader, since you're reading this in lockdown, you can undoubtedly relate to the isolation and loneliness that these policies can cause by shutting down typical channels for social interaction. In June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that one in four young adults had seriously considered suicide. Opioid and other drug related deaths are on a sharp and unsurprising upswing.

The burden of these policies falls disproportionately on some of the most vulnerable. For example, isolation led to a 20 percent increase in dementia-related deaths among our elderly population. Moreover, retrospective analysis of the lockdown in the United States shows that patients skipped cancer screenings, childhood immunizations, diabetes management visits and even treatment for heart attacks.

Internationally, the lockdowns have placed 130 million people on the brink of starvation, 80 million children at risk for diphtheria, measles and polio, and 1.8 million patients at risk of death from tuberculosis. The lockdowns in developed countries have devastated the poor in poor countries. The World Economic Forum estimates that the lockdowns will cause an additional 150 million people to fall into extreme poverty, 125 times as many people as have died from COVID.

Though there has been some coverage of lockdown harms, the media have not paid the same attention to it as they have to COVID deaths. If there is a COVID-death tracker, there should be side-by-side with it a lockdown-death tracker.

The lack of balanced media attention towards the good news about the virus and the costs of lockdowns comes with its own cost. Without a balanced approach to COVID news, the public cannot make informed choices about COVID policy, such as school closures. Even a diligent citizen cannot make an informed judgment about the wisdom of continuing lockdowns if only their benefits are emphasized and their costs downplayed. The media have an obligation to show both.

Finally, the neglect of the good COVID news breeds panic and fear, which is never a good public health strategy. The public should know that the pandemic will not be here forever. While these are challenging times – and, for many families, life-changing times – like every other pandemic in human history, the COVID-19 pandemic will end. With wise and informed policy choices, we can reduce its ultimate toll of death and human misery.

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