

An Election Day To Remember

Hand sanitizer? Check. Gloves? Check. Mask? Ok, we don't have a mask, but they should have masks at the polling station. What's that? They only have five masks? Ok, well, bring a bandana and some back-up gloves just in case. Wipes? Check. Also, order more wipes. Remember to avoid cross-contamination, use hand sanitizer if you don't have gloves on, and whatever you do...don't touch your face. Wash your hands. Call me. Be safe. Social distancing! Good luck.

That was the conversation this morning, as my wife was heading out the door for her day of work at our local polling station. I have no doubts that the dedication and professionalism of our clerks and poll workers will make the best of a chaotic situation, but we could have better supported them by pursuing one of the safer alternatives on the table. I'm also confident that most people showing up to vote in-person will know that there are high risks associated with the whole endeavor, but we could've chosen a path with far less risk for everyone. It is, National Public Health Week after all.

Too many people are probably not going to vote today. Tragically, that is probably the right decision for many of them, especially anyone in a vulnerable population. To be clear, I appreciate the difficulties that postponing an election would create, but to hold an election like this during a public health emergency needlessly endangers the entire state. This election could also serve to counteract the efforts we've put in place to try and flatten the curve and to give our healthcare systems the capacity they need to take care of us. Those efforts have come with a high cost, but they have been working. Why take steps that could reset everything with a secondary or tertiary wave of infections?

We won't know right away if we've managed to pull off an election without making a bad situation worse. Rather because of its long fuse, we will have to wait for 10-14 days to see if we get an "election bump" in the data associated with this virus. If we do well, there will be no tangible increase to the number of cases per day or the number of deaths associated with those cases. However, if an election held in a state with widespread community transmission of COVID-19 doesn't go well, we will have many more cases and the certainty of death for a percentage of those cases. I hope with every bone in my body that we do not see an increase in cases or deaths, but some of the scenarios across the state—like Milwaukee going from 180 polling locations to 5—make it hard to believe that we will get through this unscathed.

What should be clear to everyone at this point is that we need to insist upon a non-partisan approach to the decisions being made for our state and for public health during this crisis. Neither the virus nor the grisly mathematics associated with charting its spread care if one is a democrat, republican, libertarian, independent, or otherwise. This disease is an equal opportunity disruptor with the potential to wreak even more havoc in our state.

Aside from well-placed election worries, there have also been some questions about testing. Why aren't there more tests taking place in Portage County? The short answer is that we have tiered testing protocols in place via the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) due to the national shortage of testing kits and the reagents used in the testing process. [This piece by the Center for Infection Disease Research and Policy \(CIDRAP\)](#) does a good job of explaining this as well as the role of testing in the fight against COVID-19. It also touches upon the variety of plans being forwarded to 're-open' the economy.

"A lot of plans proposed imagine unlimited testing capacity and instantaneous results, which would necessitate a public health army that doesn't exist," said Duchin. He said that in absence of a total Wuhan, China-style lockdown, containment of the virus would require a robust, boots-on-the-ground contact tracing effort that would require public health employees that no state or county currently has."

Thankfully, the state's capacity to process tests has ramped up considerably over the last couple of weeks and some hospitals have joined the effort with their labs. We still need more test kits, though. Absent those tests, we might even see the capacity to process tests exceed the number of tests coming into labs across the state.

I am 100% confident that if test kit availability changes in the state of Wisconsin—and there are numerous efforts across the US to get more tests where they are needed—the protocols for testing and the number of tests being done will reflect that. The role of testing and how it can help to improve a response to a situation like this—especially in the early stages—is well known. Unfortunately, we're past the early stages in most areas of the country, and that coupled with the lack of tests is why we're seeing states postponing elections and ordering shutdowns.

When discussing testing, it's important to emphasize that the county does not have the authority to tell local hospitals how they should be operating. Thankfully, we don't need to try and put ourselves into that position. Our friends and colleagues at these hospitals are very forthright with us about what they are experiencing, how we can help each other, and what they need now and might need in the near future should things deteriorate in our region. There are existing partnerships and friendships to rely upon and new partnerships being forged to help health care workers and the general public get through all of this. There are still considerable challenges, but we at least have these relationships and a strong sense of community to lean on during an exceptionally tough time.

All of that being said, I get the frustration that people are feeling. You are not alone. Unfortunately, we can't let our frustration keep us from action. So, we forge ahead in the areas within our control and with every resource we can muster, and we take care of people as best as we can in circumstances that are far from ideal. Thank you all for caring as much as you do and know that we are all right there with you and will continue to be with you as we all work through this.

Remember, being informed and taking appropriate precautions based on what we know gives us a lot of individual and collective influence on how COVID-19 works its way through our community. That's an important note to end on, too, because it's easy to feel powerless in this situation. Yet, we learn more about COVID-19 every day, and the body of knowledge that's being assembled by the best and brightest across the globe is empowering all of us. That should hopefully make us all feel more confident in how we can protect ourselves and our families, and it truly highlights how knowledge is power.