

VMG COVID-19 UPDATE

Wednesday, May 13, 2020
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Issue #

We reached the middle of the week and it's a sunny day and it's supposed to feel a bit like summer next week. That's good for us all.

My Opinion

You know that one of the hottest subjects in discussions about the virus (second probably to vaccines) is opening up the economy, returning to "normal life." Yesterday I talked about the confusion of the "medical end" to the pandemic with "the social end." The latter happens when enough people start saying and acting like "I've had enough," "I need to resume my normal life." This occurs usually before the medical end (when new cases drop and death rates fall).

Today, there are stories about an "armed militia" showing up outside a barber shop in a town in Michigan to make sure that police don't enforce a stay closed order on the barber. They are making the case (and that's a charitable characterization) that freedom for a business to open and for people to get haircuts is more important than public health. (You can read their signage in the news if you wish). Dangerous in all kinds of ways. Fueled by what?

In this week's edition of *The New Yorker* magazine, Atul Gawande writes about the relative success of our hospitals (he's at Mass General Brigham) in learning about how to stop the spread of the virus (and save lives) once the pandemic got going. He writes about using these same techniques to stop the "lockdown" in our communities once we are ready and the medical signs suggest it's time to begin. He describes it as a social "combination therapy" approach, rigorously applied, supported, and enforced. You'll recognize the elements: hygiene, screening, distancing, and masks. Do all four well and you cut down rates of transmission. Be lax about any, and they become much less effective. He goes on to describe a fifth element: culture.

"Culture is the fifth, and arguably the most difficult, pillar of a new combination therapy to stop the coronavirus. People tend to focus on two desires: safety and freedom; keep me safe and leave me alone. What we need to embrace is the desire to keep others safe, not just ourselves. We need them to say, "I'm worried about my sore throat, and I am going to stay home." Or "I am O.K. with being reminded to pull my mask up." That is the culture of the operating room. It's about wanting, among other things, never to be the one to make someone else sick." Can we get there as a culture? Can we call each other on these measures when we see them being disregarded? Can we get our friends and family and neighbors and community organizations on board for the good of us all? Can we avoid the freedom vs. public health debate and agree on a path that will save lives so that freedom can be enjoyed by all?

State and Regional

With more than 79,000 confirmed cases and more than 5,100 deaths, Governor Baker reiterated today that he will wait until May 18 (next week) to release his plan for reopening but he will not open until he

feels it is safe to do so. He is looking at a 20% decrease in hospitalizations from the peak rate in April and that supports a “phased reopening” on a “slow roll” basis.

At VMG

Questions have been asked about how long we will be booking virtual appointments, video and telephone as our primary means of visits for patients. We’re trying to balance safety needs and efficacy needs. So far, we think that telehealth, in this environment, is safer and appropriate for care for most patients. Steve and I agree that we should plan to schedule in this manner through the end of 2020. We will continue to schedule some in person visits as the clinical picture suggests they are necessary, as directed by practitioners. We will also continue to have a thoughtful planned expansion of services as we are able, and as we are allowed by state agencies such as the Department of Public Health.

There is now an active Massachusetts Tracking program to outreach to COVID-19 positive patients and their contacts. If anyone receives a call from “MA COVID TEAM,” please answer the call and let your supervisor know about information being requested. This is part of the effort to make sure that we do everything we can to contain and slow the virus.

Thanks again for doing all you can to make sure we are all in this together.

As usual, please wash your hands (a lot), don’t touch your face, maintain social/physical distancing (it works), wear a mask, and continue to be in touch with and take care of each other.

Be well,

Joel

Be patient; be mindful

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