



Less Covid-19 Now. The Coast is Clearing. Briefly. Enjoy. Spoiler Alert: Some Storm Clouds on the Horizon.

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I said I'd write again when the coast is clear in Rhode Island. The coast is clearer or clear-ish: infections are down and have been falling week over week for six weeks. Hospitalizations are down but still higher than I'd like them to be. Deaths continue, about one a day or less now – too many for sure but less than I expected, and most deaths are from infections contracted about a month ago during the last surge. So the likelihood of getting Covid-19 is much less than it was, and the likelihood of vaccinated and boosted people needing the hospital and dying is very small indeed -- unless they are very elderly and immunosuppressed *and* get Covid-19. Or unimmunized.

So I think it's time to move around again, but carefully, which for me means eating outside in restaurants, going to the beach, shopping in stores (masked) and going to outside parties. For now, masking helps prevent the masked person from getting infected, at least a little. I'm not convinced it contributes that much to reducing community spread, as most of the people susceptible to the most recent variant have already been infected. But there is no downside to masking until community spread drops to much lower than it is – to less than 50 new cases/100,000 per week. (We are

now at about 150 new cases/100,000 per week, and dropping. And people are outside and have their windows open. The testing numbers have become unreliable though, because testing sites have closed and many people test at home, and are about to become less reliable yet when the State closes all its testing sites at the end of the month.)

So party if you wish. But *carefully*. There may be two weeks or so to party hardy around the 4th of July. We are not quite at party hardy yet. But please live and breathe and drink in the late spring and early summer now. It is so beautiful out there.

That said, there is another surge coming. BA.4 and BA.5 are here. There is an early indication that they are spreading in some communities. They will likely surge in early August. So we have max four to six weeks to relax and enjoy. We'll need caution and masking again in about a month, I'm afraid. But let's make hay while the sun shines.

But an interesting and hopeful thing happened with the last surge. We had too many deaths to be sure (8 in April. 16 in May. Probably 15 to 30 in June, the result of the last surge) but WAY fewer than the 50-100 I expected – and boy was I glad to be wrong.

But the fewer deaths mean something interesting may be happening to our collective immunity. We *may* be evolving a collective immune response that will make Covid-19 a trivial infection, that will make it “just a cold” like the other coronaviruses. It's a little too early to say that for sure – we need to see what happens in the next surge, but if I'm right, each surge will result in fewer and fewer hospitalizations and deaths, until we stop noticing each surge as it comes through, other than noticing that “there is a cold going around.”

That all means that the combination of vaccinations and repeated infections will have gotten most of us immune enough to reduce the intensity of the spread of the virus and also render the virus incapable of causing serious disease, which is exactly where we want to be.

The virus will still kill the very elderly and the very frail, as does influenza and pneumonia, but viewed another way, it isn't the virus that is killing the elderly and the frail, it is the aging process itself. Then, the virus is just the messenger, and not really the cause, understanding that we all die of something, and the point is not to fear inevitable death but to live a robust and engaged life, so

that when the end comes, it is time to celebrate, not mourn. My physician colleagues have long called pneumonia “the old man’s friend” by which we mean that we recognize that the end comes to all of us and recognize that pneumonia (and influenza and now Covid-19) help people who have outlived their bodies and are suffering come to a dignified end.

People who resisted vaccines and masking understood that this evolution happens, I think. But they were so caught up in logic of their arguments that they forgot that many people who are not infirm or immunosuppressed would get very sick early in the process and too many would die, and their strength of their beliefs about freedom blinded them to the vulnerabilities of others.

(In a certain way, watching this is like seeing evolution in action, right here in front of our eyes. A virus arrives. We slowly develop immunity to it. It evolves more. Our immunity gets stronger, until the virus becomes trivial. (I can't confirm that has happened yet. So please be careful until we see what happens with the next surge.) The deaths in the process are tragic, but the grand sweep of this process also has a certain kind of beauty, what some might call the finger of G-d in the world. We wouldn't exist without this process, which brought us into being and sustains us. It's like seeing a rainbow – the physics of refraction -- right in front of our eyes. Wow.)

One final note. I'm just back from a week in Cape Verde, and from a trip arranged by an amazing organization called Project Health Cape Verde, which brings a number of US volunteers – CNAs, interpreters, PAs, surgeons, infectious disease doctors and primary care doctors, to Cape Verde to help out a little with patient care. Cape Verde, which has an annual income about one tenth of ours, spends \$177 per person per year on health care. We spend \$12,000. They lost a quarter of the number of people we lost to Covid, proportionately. They are 90 percent immunized. Their biggest problem was countering the false beliefs of Cape Verdean people living in the US who passed those beliefs on to family and friends. And they have a health care system that has way less resources than they need to do the job they are trying to do – but they still manage to take care of everyone. Something for all Americans to learn from.

Be careful out there. I'll write again when the next surge gets intense and it's time to be extra careful again, likely about the third week in July.

Have a good 4th and a good summer. Let's celebrate as one

people. Please. Before trouble bigger than Covid-19 comes at us and picks us apart.

Michael

Many thanks again to Nick Landekic, who provides me with tons of data and publications over the last thirty months, and whose knowledge of Covid-19 is encyclopedic. Thanks as well to the many readers who respond to these emails and help keep me honest.



Photo by Elëna Zhukova
