

Preventing Pandemics Like COVID-19 and Other Animal-to-Human Diseases

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Excerpted from David O. Wiebers and Valery L. Feigin What the COVID-19 Crisis Is Telling Humanity Neuroepidemiology 2020;54:283–286 285 DOI: 10.1159/000508654

“The time has come for us to rethink our relationship with all life on this planet – other humans, nonhumans, and the earth, a life form in itself. What is good for nonhumans and the earth is virtually always in the best interests of humans, given the profound interconnectedness of all life. All that we do depends upon abundant plant and animal life as well as clean air and water. Each of us can have a positive impact upon these fundamentals by demonstrating and inspiring an enhanced mindfulness, beginning most basically with what we eat and how all of our daily choices and actions may be affecting animals and natural habitats. Ultimately, the survival, not only of other life forms on this planet, but also of our own, will depend upon humanity’s ability to recognize the oneness of all that exists and the importance and deeper significance of compassion for all life”. Wiebers, D. O., & Feigin, V. L. (2020). [What the COVID-19 Crisis Is Telling Humanity](#). *Neuroepidemiology*, 54(4), 283–286.

This valuable communication considers the genesis of zoonotic diseases like the current global COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to our treatment and consumption of other species. From a neuropsychiatric perspective it examines how we respond to such crises, their emotional and socio-economic consequences and what changes in human behavior are called for to more effectively prevent such catastrophic, anthropogenic health crises.

Our fear-based attitude toward viruses and bacteria is based on our not appreciating how these and other micro-organisms function and help sustain this living world. Parts of them are in our DNA and vital cellular content and without them in our guts we would die in a few days. They also can play an environmentally beneficial role in regulating population density, in optimizing ecological biodiversity and reducing dysbiosis.

This current pandemic and others that are likely to become pandemics in the future, call for ever more vaccines and medications, which are not-risk-free, so long as preventive medicine remains human-centered and does not address, under the banner of One Health, wildlife poaching and trafficking, farming, habitat encroachment, our ever-increasing human numbers and consumption of animals wild and domesticated. The concept of One Health is not new and perhaps has even enjoyed stronger endorsement and support in past decades prior to the advent of clinical specialization in human and veterinary medicine. Steps to achieving the end point of this concept and seeing it put into action internationally are well articulated by the One Health Initiative. (1) The COVID-19 pandemic, with more predicted, puts the applicability concept and its activation in bold relief.

A rise in zoonotic diseases is being driven by environmental degradation, according to a report by the UN Environment Program and the International Livestock Research Institute that cites rising demand for animal protein, intensive farming practices, exploitation of wildlife and climate change among key factors. The authors suggest adopting a One Health approach, which would unite public health, veterinary and environmental experts to respond to and prevent zoonotic disease outbreaks. (2).

Giving the public hope in protective, animal-tested vaccinations now being developed around the world and evaluating various drugs to treat infected patients may be to little avail considering how this SARS CoV-2 virus can mutate into a new strain or variant causing a different set of health problems and varying according to age, pre-existing health issues, sex and race. Vaccination limitations are a documented problem with the influenza virus that means some vaccine formulations that are not without intrinsic

vaccinosis risks, will not provide adequate protection. Also, some vaccinations can mean increased susceptibility to other viral infections.

Regrettably, organized veterinary medicine in the farm/food animal sector in particular has prioritized human interests of profitability and productivity over animal health and well-being; and in poor countries and communities fails to adequately serve the animal health-needs of small producers where corruption, falsifying vaccination records and inadequate surveillance and prevention of zoonotic diseases have been well documented. (3).

Millions of mammals, amphibians, birds, insects and reptiles are imported legally into the US every year, potentially bringing with them "a kaleidoscope of pathogens," writes former Fish and Wildlife Service inspector Jonathan Kolby. "With few exceptions, the US has no laws specifically requiring disease surveillance for wildlife entering the country, and the vast majority of wild animal imports are therefore not tested," Kolby writes. (4)

While this reality may make one despair, all countries should be severely sanctioned economically for engaging in wildlife trafficking and for having open markets selling wild-caught animals. And there must be a redoubling of wild habitat protection from human encroachment with population control through voluntary and ready access to family planning, smaller families and communities needing fewer livestock to sustain their needs.

Philosopher David Benatar observes "It is curious, therefore, that changing the way humans treat animals—most basically, ceasing to eat them or, at the very least, radically limiting the quantity of them that are eaten—is largely off the radar as a significant preventive measure." (5).

In an article in the [The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) the authors put the responsibility for COVID-19 squarely on our shoulders. "There is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us. As with the climate and biodiversity crises, recent pandemics are a direct consequence of human activity – particularly our global financial and economic systems, based on a limited paradigm that prizes economic growth at any cost. We have a small window of opportunity, in overcoming the challenges of the current crisis, to avoid sowing the seeds of future ones," (6).

Hopefully this global health crisis is catalyzing international collaboration in prevention and treatment. We may yet see the emergence of a United Environmental Nations that unshackles public health from politics, nationalism, isolationism and prioritizing the economy over the health and security of the people and links public health with environmental and animal health. Above all, humans should keep out of wildlife habitat where such diseases emerge and to which we have no immunity; and for consumers in industrial countries to support producers of organically certified foods to sustain a healthful vegetarian/vegan diet with minimal or zero consumption of eggs, dairy, meat including sea foods.

Continuing to consume animals as a basic food-source, marketing ever more vaccines and having ever more children, the rich and poor alike will be subject to the indiscriminate justice of natural law until we all abide in greater harmony with other species as well as with each other. Alternatively, with deteriorating natural controls of health-sustaining biodiversity, plagues and pestilences of Biblical proportions will be the legacy of our collective failure in planetary stewardship that surviving generations will inherit.

As a One-Health advocating veterinarian I appeal to all consumers and governments to consider the impossibility of preventing such pandemics and other animal-food-borne epidemics and regional outbreaks of disease because of the enormous scale of factory farm animal production systems---billions

of poultry and pigs world-wide that are the primary source of various strains of influenza virus and antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria (7)

At best, all the suffering, death, grieving and economic impact of this latest COVID-19 pandemic will change how we chose to live: Most especially to reduce our collective exploitation and consumption of animals that bring on such pandemics and other zoonotic diseases along with accelerating climate change and loss of biodiversity as well as animal suffering.

References

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