

# **The Misguided Response to COVID-19(SARS-CoV-2) in an Urban Environment Leads to Compounding Human Tragedy and Economic Damage**

**“Always love your country but never trust your government.”**

Robert Novak (1)

**“One who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived.”**

Niccolo Machiavelli (2)

Civilization has been confronted by the evils of nature many times in the past. Once again, the world finds itself fighting a global pandemic and having to navigate all of the havoc created in its path. We rely on modern science to provide us with explanations and answers but outcome results from research studies of a new pathogen do not appear overnight. In previous plagues, our ancestors depended upon available medical knowledge and common sense for resolve. If only our present leadership did more of the same.

During this healthcare crisis, we find ourselves facing a war against a microscopic enemy. War comes with mistakes, some understandable, and others avoidable. In a noble effort to manage the situation, many steps have already been taken by those in command for which they performed well. However, there are at least 2 major blunders, glaringly obvious, either missed or purposely avoided, unnecessarily compounding the human tragedy and economic damage. It is these 2 important steps that need to be explored and put into laser focus.

The Coronavirus, COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2), is a new pathogen to humankind. Presently an enigma but in the near future, scientific analysis will unlock information leading to a better understanding of the virus, methods of transmission, treatment, prevention, etc.

The fact that COVID-19 is new and mysteries abound, does not prevent us from utilizing the centuries of judgment gained from previous viral outbreaks, in addition to pragmatic solutions when dealing with an airborne illness. It will not be the last new pathogen humanity will encounter and future preparation is essential to avoid the same mistakes recently made.

The Coronavirus is known to be transmitted by aerosolization of vapor droplets from person to person. “Fomite transmission of SARS-Cov-2”, ”spread of disease by objects or material, is considered “plausible”, as reported in experimental circumstances, similar to SARS Cov-1, and is of concern with nosocomial ( hospital-based spread) and superspreading events. (3). As a precaution, disinfecting protocols should have been placed into effect immediately based upon the information from previous SARS and other infectious outbreaks.

Focusing on the known, major method of transmission regarding airborne viruses, aerosolization, covering one's mouth and nose, when sneezing or coughing to prevent the spread of any potential germs, is an approach drummed into the head of every child worldwide from the time they can comprehend such instructions. In certain situations, why wait to mask those areas?

The concept of wearing facial covering to save lives and ultimately mitigate damage to our economy should have been embraced at the onset of the pandemic as numerous articles supporting such methodology with viral pathogens exist(4-14). Unfortunately, the public was fed misinformation from all levels of government (inexcusable if intentional) tied to politics, inadequate preparation, a deficiency of supplies, etc.,

“Seriously people — **STOP BUYING MASKS!**” the surgeon general, Jerome M. Adams, [said in a tweet](#) on Saturday morning (2/29/20). “They are **NOT effective** in preventing general public from catching **#Coronavirus**, but if health care providers can’t get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!”(15).

On February 2, 2020, “Dr. Oxiris Barbot, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, emphasized that the city **didn't encourage healthy people to wear masks because they are ineffective.**”(16). Commissioner Barbot said: "It's important for us to first and foremost protect our health care workforce." And then added that mask-wearing may give ordinary people "a false sense of security" and they will overlook important preventive practices such as washing hands(16). Additionally, she has said residents should instead, “come together, know the information and share that information.” But she warned, “rumors can be as dangerous as any virus.” She repeated her instructions to the public to wash hands often, cover one’s mouth and nose while sneezing and coughing.”(30). Further commenting on March 4, 2020, Dr. Barbot said.“We know that there’s currently no indication that it’s easy to transmit by casual contact... We want New Yorkers to go about their daily lives, **ride the subway, take the bus, go see your neighbors.**”(17)

NYC’s administrative view regarding the use of masks during the pandemic was again on display on February 20, 2020, during a panel discussion on the Coronavirus at the Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York. “Dr. Syra Madad, senior director of the special-pathogens program for NYC Health and Hospitals, **reiterated the city's view that masks can't protect healthy people.**”(16).

Mayor Bill de Blasio, on March 10, 2020, said: "But there is a real difference between the interaction the people, everyday people, have with others versus when a health professional sees many, many patients in a day in much more intimate dynamics."(17).

New York State's Governor Cuomo, on April 15, 2020, first ordered the general public to wear masks when venturing out of their homes to help stop the spread of COVID-19(18). The executive order, occurring weeks after the stay in place edict on March 22, 2020. Once again our government fell short in the common sense department by not knowing or deciding against telling our citizens much earlier what they decided to inform them of in April.

Despite the fact reports surfaced in the literature as early as February 21, 2020, addressing the pathogens presumed transmission through asymptomatic carriers(19, 20), the

government claimed to be unaware asymptomatic carriers existed and could spread the disease. Having recently received this ‘new information’ was the reason cited for why and when they changed their view regarding the value of masks.

The concept of asymptomatic carriers is far from new and exists in many contagious illnesses. Armed with this knowledge, it would have been far more prudent and safer for the public, had those in charge assumed these carriers were in abundance until proven otherwise, and applied this theory the moment decisions were made regarding preventative care.

The State’s order was months after the Chinese leadership were seen wearing masks (often N95) during photo-ops while in public places. As much as we don’t trust China, for whatever they may or may not do, they are not ignorant of the facts. They clearly knew and understood what preventative measures were required for themselves and acted accordingly, especially the use of masks. In addition, to demonstrate their resolve, “China imported more than two billion masks and 25 million pieces of protective clothing from overseas before the coronavirus outbreak reached pandemic levels”(21,22,23,24).

As reported on March 27, 2020, George Gao, director-general of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had the following comment “*The big mistake in the U.S. and Europe, in my opinion, is that people aren’t wearing masks. This virus is transmitted by droplets and close contact. Droplets play a very important role—you’ve got to wear a mask, because when you speak, there are always droplets coming out of your mouth. Many people have asymptomatic or presymptomatic infections. If they are wearing face masks, it can prevent droplets that carry the virus from escaping and infecting others.*” ed years prior to the Coronavirus pandemic. Gao earned a Ph.D. in biochemistry at the University of Oxford and did postdocs there and at Harvard University, specializing in immunology and virology.” (25).

The failure to close down mass transit was another major contributing factor to the mass transmission of the virus and will, in my opinion, ultimately be found in future studies, to be a substantial reason, as to why the outer boroughs in NYC were affected to the degree to which they were.

The administration's actions helped to foster confusion and a lack of trust. Our elected leadership needed to do everything, as rapidly as possible, in an effort to effectively control the situation. “New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced on Thursday, March 12, 2020, the state would ban all gatherings of more than 500 people.”(28). Cuomo said the measure would not apply to schools, hospitals, nursing homes, or mass transit. Thus, the ban did not apply to the very large crowds gathered together in the tight confines of major subway platforms (especially during rush hour), train cars or buses. Even when the Governor further ratcheted the crowd size down to 50 people, it still did not apply to mass transit. The statement was thus inconsistent and counter-productive(29).

When mass transit ridership was found to have significantly decreased, the general public actually found itself in a better position in regard to prevention, as there was increased opportunity to social distance while on commuting. However, that didn’t stop NYC leaders from

creating their next mistake by decreasing the available service being offered. As a result, the cars, once again, became more crowded and further eliminated social distancing at a time when most patrons were not wearing any facial protection, as they were informed it was of no value(30,31,32).

Suddenly, many weeks into the situation, it was reported there was an urging from NYC Council members to close the subways. “We believe that drastic measures must be taken to stop the spread of COVID-19 in our transit system,” the lawmakers — Robert Holden, Eric Ulrich, Mark Gonaj, and Peter Koo — say in a letter to Cuomo(26).

The risk of keeping the subways open was far too great, for how could the government correctly insist that social distancing is essential to the solution while simultaneously allowing mass crowding in the confined spaces of mass transit?

The concern regarding closing mass transit revolved around the question of how would the essential workers commute to work? Not surprisingly, alternative, safer methods of transportation could have been provided, two examples being;

1) An abundance of school buses, suddenly available and sitting idle (as well as metro buses had mass transit been locked down), coupled with empty highways, created an opportunity to develop a free shuttle service. Safer arrangements for the ridership could then have been fashioned for appropriate social distancing, complete with facial covering.

2) NYC has been advocating bicycling as a means of transportation for several years and with the advantage of traffic-free roads, a perfect opportunity presented itself to further promote such an agenda.

Other effective ideas exist which could have been implemented to improve the situation. The combination of keeping mass transit open and not promoting facial covering considerably expanded the problem of viral transmission.

Had our leaders paid any serious attention to the published evidence, as well as applying logic, eliminating political agendas, etc., many more lives could have been saved, the duration of the pandemic in our region potentially shortened and the damage to our economy mitigated. Any government who had genuinely made an effort into preparing for a pandemic should have absolutely been aware of the available information regarding the transmission of airborne pathogens, the use of masks, as well as the effect of mass transportation during such an event and, acted accordingly(4-13).

But what if the information was not available or the level of evidence to be of poor quality? Does that excuse their action? Why did it take so long for Governor Cuomo to say” What’s the harm in wearing a mask”(4/15/2020), "You see the flattening of the curve," Cuomo said. "We're not out of the woods ... but we can control the spread." (having made the statement on April 15, 2020, in reference to ordering the wearing of a mask in public in a further effort to mitigate the spread(27). No new scientific discoveries were made regarding the transmission of the virus from the time it first arrived on our shores to the time the order from the NYS Governor was given which would prompt a sudden change in thinking from no value to value.

In the absence of information, rather than waiting an extended period of time for the results of an outcome study, a logic model could have been created. Such a model would provide the outcomes we would like to achieve as well as a detailed plan of how to bring the desired goals to fruition. Contained within the model would most assuredly be, but not limited to the following; Method(s) of transmission, possible vectors, hosts, composition of the pathogen including its dimensions (COVID-19 is approximately 1.25 microns), eliminating or reducing access to areas where the populace finds itself in densely packed places (mass transit, supermarkets, elevators), facial protection, as well as further mitigation techniques, etc. The model would provide the public with the precise facts needed to fully comprehend the situation and the appropriate actions required of them to achieve the coveted results. The populace would have a clear understanding as to the how and why prevention is currently the **only** proven, effective management in containing and eliminating the pandemic. The intended accomplishments would expect a large segment of society to comply with the preventive recommendations at the onset of an outbreak by adhering to social distancing, following the stay at home order, minimizing exposure in densely crowded confined areas as well as wearing at least 1 or more masks, scarfs, bandanas, while out in public, etc.

It has taken China months of draconian lockdown, to create a partial solution leading to an opening of their economy. How long will it take us, when there has been only partial lockdown, a continuation of mass transit, only recently an order to wear masks in public and a percentage of the populace refusing to cooperate?

Our leadership continues to make obvious, common sense mistakes, failing to apply historical knowledge, as well as inserting politics into the equation at the expense of everyone's physical and financial health. There exists an enormous potential to lead us to a second tsunami when the administration prematurely tries to reopen the economy. Are we going to make the same decisions during a second wave or when the next flu season arrives or are we going to make the necessary changes?

Confidence is low, as government intervention, more often than not, takes the long route around a problem. Had appropriate actions been promptly applied in regard to masks and mass transit, we would be much further along in resolving the situation.

For everything, there is a first time and here's hoping, one day our government may actually use common sense and be pleasantly surprised at the outcome. However, I'm not holding my breath, for as Voltaire so eloquently put it "Common sense is not so common."(33).

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