

Covid-19

I am writing this on 21 March 2020, and I am pretty confident that by the time you read this that whatever I say will already be hopelessly out of date. Plus, it's only really what I think, and I have already changed my mind multiple times already. Two weeks ago, I found out that the vast majority of our clinics, and all of the operating lists, were cancelled. This was after we had worked extremely hard to lower our waiting lists, such that with diabetic and glaucoma patients we were within a hair's breadth for the first time since the creation of the universe to be seeing patients on time. I felt cheated. The English hadn't cancelled their activity and it seemed like a gigantic overreaction. In fact, I was so incensed that I did my best to classify all my activity as 'essential' in a bid to carry on as normally as possible.

I attended several Covid meetings which, at the time, were a rarity amongst all the other meetings and the management and some senior medical colleagues seemed to be of the impression that the End Days were upon us so we had to prepare ventilators and all sorts of other nonsense to get ready. I was told to shave my beard off, which I duly did, for a mask fitting charade. I say charade, as I was instructed how to use a mask and then told it only worked for half an hour or so and there were precious few such masks in the hospital anyway so that was that.

Then a week or so ago everyone went collectively insane. I could not get any bread, toilet paper or milk anywhere. All the teaching I was booked to deliver got cancelled. All the meetings I had been preparing for suddenly evaporated away. Things I had been trying to achieve; the RCOphth in Wales, a streamlining of the diabetic eye clinic system in Swansea and training new non-medical staff for the medical retina service were all suddenly and unceremoniously kicked so far into the long grass that even the grass was too far away for me to see. Covid was everything. "Don't you know there's a war on!?" was the sort of response from anyone in authority whenever I tried to do anything other than tackle Covid. I thought this was bad, but then the University stopped teaching medical students, my research project got put on hold, all the schools shut and my flight to Greece for the Easter holidays got cancelled. Then international travel was severely curtailed and even pubs and restaurants closed. I had always been stressed in a slight constant background way due to there being a thousand and one tasks to do all at once, but

these tasks were all melting away like snow in springtime. Or, in fact, snow in summertime. The highlight of my year, Prof Sue Lightman giving the guest lecture at my regional teaching afternoon, was cancelled.

Initially, I was bemused. Every meeting was a Covid meeting now. The medics would prophesy doom and death, the management would collectively have a nervous breakdown and everyone else would grow increasingly scared at talk of having to man complicated medical equipment. The memes started up in force on social media with grinning pictures of Jack Nicholson in a surgical mask threatening would-be victims that an ophthalmologist would be looking after their pneumonia if they didn't stay home. But it seemed that internally there was rising panic in the hospital.

This panic started manifesting with masks, or the lack thereof. Ophthalmologists are considered a high-risk group and in China everyone was wearing Ebola style personal protective equipment. Even the Italians were wearing impressive looking hats masks and gowns. We were given useless surgical masks and blue non-sterile gloves. So naturally the junior staff were concerned, and nobody can blame them for this. It didn't help that every hospital in the UK seemed to be tackling this differently with WhatsApp groups and Facebook posts spreading lies, conjecture, viral messages (ironically) and whipping up everyone into a perfect storm of anguished concern.

So now we are here, 21 March. Popular opinion now is that we are 'two weeks behind Italy' and if you extrapolate this horror, some twelve weeks behind mass death and the collapse of civil society. I personally just don't think the maths add up; Italy is not the UK and more people live in one small suburb of Wuhan than the whole of Wales. We have no clue what the actual number of infected people here is as we are doing minimal testing. My partner constantly thinks she has the virus and my grandfather thinks he had it a few months ago even before the outbreak in China, which would technically make him patient zero. And now every time I cough, I think I have it myself. Coughing is such a social sin now that I try and suppress it when I can and during one consultation came close to exploding my larynx attempting to suppress one. Now that I think back, I realise I normally cough most days once or twice for various reasons. But now I don't. Sanctimonious middle-class people have now even started advertising their own perfection by posting on social media about how much they stay

at home, accompanied by derisive posts about those who dare to take a walk on this bright sunny day. Even my mother has started talking about flattening the curve, although by the way she talks I am not too confident she knows what that actually means.

What will become of us? This seems at present to be a gigantic morality test. A few of my colleagues are selflessly and Hippocratically chomping on the bit to drive a ventilator and save lives on medical wards, despite being twenty years out of touch with general medicine. Our old clinical lead is the most Scappy-Doo of all of them despite being technically retired. Other colleagues are not only opting to self-isolate but are opting to self-isolate for three whole months to avoid getting sick themselves. It really is quite fascinating to see how different people react to a crisis on a scale measured from individualism to taking reckless risks to themselves by putting others first. I have some sort of experience of this varying response having watched multiple zombie apocalypse movies in my time.

What about me though? I am still confused. I just don't think that this is the Armageddon that everyone seems to be saying it is. The numbers don't stack up. I have actually been to the real Armageddon, properly called Megiddo, in modern day Israel. The ruins I felt were picturesque, but the gift shop did not make the most out of the significance of the site I feel. There were no 'I survived Armageddon and all I got was this lousy T-shirt' or any other similar tatty gift ideas present at all. But I am shocked at how quickly modern Western democracies can be scared into panic buying, fighting over toilet paper, closing down almost every institution other than Tesco and actually calling for some sort of military curfew and quarantine. Shocked to my core. I think it was Roosevelt that said that the only thing to fear is fear itself, but it seems fear is actually something pretty gigantically significant. Good luck everyone!

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