



California State Coroners' Association

March 19, 2020

Message from the President about COVID-19,

I see a lot of information going out that says we should stay at home and avoid crowds and wash our hands because there is a virus out there that is bad. But why is it bad? What makes it so much worse than seasonal illnesses we experience every year? We have heard some say "it's like the flu", but it is not. Here is the best explanation I've seen and it comes from Tamra Adams Mendoza who works at Pennington Biomedical Research Center.

“Feeling confused as to why Coronavirus is a bigger deal than Seasonal flu? Here it is in a nutshell. I hope this helps. Feel free to share this with others who don't understand.

It has to do with RNA sequencing...i.e. genetics. Seasonal flu is an “all human virus”. The DNA/RNA chains that make up the virus are recognized by the human immune system. This means that your body has some immunity to it before it comes around each year. You get immunity two ways, through exposure to a virus, or by getting a flu shot. Novel viruses come from animals. The World Health Organization tracks novel viruses in animals, (sometimes for years watching for mutations). Usually these viruses only transfer from animal to animal (pigs in the case of H1N1) (birds in the case of the Spanish flu). But once one of these animal viruses mutates and starts to transfer from animals to humans, it becomes a problem. We have no natural or acquired immunity, the RNA sequencing of the genes inside the virus isn't human, and the human immune system doesn't recognize it, so we can't fight it off. Sometimes, the mutation only allows transfer from animal to human. For years its only transmission is from an infected animal to a human before it finally mutates so that it can now transfer human to human. Once that happens, we have a new contagion phase. How contagious or how deadly the virus strain is depends on the makeup of this new mutation. H1N1 was deadly, but it did not mutate in a way that was as deadly as the Spanish flu. Its RNA was slower to mutate and it attacked its host differently, too.

Now, here comes this Coronavirus. It existed in animals only (nobody knows how long), but one day at an animal market in Wuhan China in December 2019, it mutated and made the jump from animal to people. At first only animals could give it to a person. But here is the scary part, in just TWO WEEKS it mutated again and gained the ability to jump from human to human. Scientists call this quick ability, “slippery.” This Coronavirus, not being in any form a “human” virus (whereas we would all have some natural or acquired immunity) took off like a rocket. Because humans have no known immunity, doctors have no known medicines for it. It just so happens that this particular mutated animal virus changed itself in such a way that it causes great damage to human lungs. It has already mutated AGAIN, so that we now have two strains to deal with, strain S and strain L, which makes it twice as hard to develop a vaccine.

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We really have no tools in our shed with this. History has shown that fast and immediate closing of public places has helped in the past pandemics. Philadelphia and Baltimore were reluctant to close events in 1918 and they were the hardest hit in the US during the Spanish Flu. Right now it is hitting older folks harder, but this genome is so slippery, and a subsequent mutation might result it the virus being more harmful to younger, healthier people.”

So let's not panic, but let's be smart about this. Stay at home, avoid crowds and wash your hands. And stop hoarding the toilet paper!

Sincerely,

Bruce E. Lyle
CSCA President

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