

The Hallowell BOH consists of three physicians in active practice in this area who prioritize the health and well-being of our community. We are your neighbors and friends, and acknowledge the significant impact of “quarantine fatigue” on all of us. These are undoubtedly challenging times and we are concerned by the difficulties facing our local businesses and the future of our city and local community. We are all disappointed by the cancellation of Old Hallowell Day.

The city consulted us for guidance regarding how our community should deal with the COVID-19 crisis. Medicine is a science, and as physicians, we are expected to know how to navigate an infectious pandemic. All three of us actively read the medical literature on COVID-19, which changes rapidly from week to week. Even with increased knowledge, medicine and public health are still in uncharted territory. There is a better understanding of the range of symptoms COVID-19 can generate (clotting issues, strokes, lack of smell, etc.), some improvements in supportive care practices, and a small amount of progress has been made on drug therapy. However, fundamental questions remain unanswered, making it impossible to predict the effects of various proposals for relaxing current restrictions.

One of the most challenging issues is a lack of knowledge about how many people have been infected. While Maine has “flattened the curve” so far regarding the need for ICU beds and ventilators, we have no idea how many people have had a mild course, or no symptoms at all, and we continue to have new cases and a significant burden of ill people. Also, it is unclear whether patients who have recovered from COVID-19 can catch the disease again, and if they DO have immunity, how long it will last. There are a number of unanswered questions that include what is the best way to measure immunity (it would be a blood test, but what specifically should you test for) and how accurate are both the nasal swab tests for acute illness and the blood tests for past illness? Also, how does the virus spread – only big droplets that require close (<6 feet) contact or can it hover in the air for hours infecting someone who walks in the same room later (seems like a little of both...)? Additionally, it is unknown how long will it take to get a vaccine and whether it will work in older adults, who have decreased responses to shots, and what percentage of the population needs to have immunity for the pandemic to end. Clearly, there remain huge gaps in our knowledge and these unanswered questions make it difficult to determine how long this crisis will last.

As Dr. Fauci mentioned in his testimony on May 12, there are significant risks to relaxing restrictions too quickly that include an inevitable increase in the number of cases of COVID-19 and deaths that might have been preventable -- even the potential for generating a NYC-like surge. We agree with his assessment.

There are medical and societal risks to moving too slowly. Our livelihoods and our economy suffer. Individuals ignore other health needs, leading to poor control of chronic conditions like diabetes. Patients delay visits for new serious acute issues, such as a stroke. Economic stress and social isolation impact mental health and family dynamics, increasing the level of anxiety and depression in both adults and children. As physicians, we prioritize health and wellness, and our tendency is to want to move slowly to protect as many lives as possible. However, we also understand Governor Mills and our society’s collective desire and need to move forward, testing the waters as we go.

What we *do* know is that the virus will be with us for a long time, likely resulting in outbreaks and surges for the next one to two years. We also know that it will not spare rural areas, and can still thrive in warm climates such as the Maine summer. Additionally, we know that social distancing works, and the more people interact with each other, the more likely asymptomatic persons with COVID-19 will unknowingly spread the disease to their contacts.

Because asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic individuals cannot be detected by taking a temperature or other means at this point, there is no definitive way for business owners to determine which employee is OK to show up to work and serve the public without putting customers (and other workers) at risk. Everyone agrees that no one should show up for work with ANY respiratory symptoms, fever, or other signs of illness possibly indicating COVID. We can screen workers when accurate rapid testing becomes available, but asymptomatic contagious customers will still remain a threat to both workers and other patrons.

Fortunately, we can decrease the likelihood of spread by keeping a 6-foot distance as much as possible, wearing masks, frequent hand-washing, good ventilation, and plastic barriers where feasible. These techniques are not perfect but do *work* to reduce risk. The businesses that have been operating in Hallowell have already taken similar measures.

Also, we know the risk of contagion increases as the duration of contact between an infectious individual and other persons goes up, especially in an indoor environment where air is recirculating. As such, restaurant safety is especially challenging and requires generous spacing between tables. Expanded use of outside spaces to increase capacity despite distancing has the added benefit of better ventilation outdoors. We are optimistic that the State will eliminate any regulatory hurdles that would impede increasing outdoor service....and of course the weather also has to cooperate.

Despite all these precautions, as we interact with each other more *there will be more cases*. There is no way to reduce risk to zero – policies are designed to balance that risk with the need to maintain some quality of life.

Our state leaders are using the best science available to construct the tiered model announced in early May for opening up Maine over the next few months. Many epidemiologists feel their plan moves *too* quickly, while concurrently, others argue that this pandemic does not justify such infringements on civil liberties. We do not envy our Governor or CDC director as this is an unprecedented event in modern history, and they face an incredibly complex set of issues under conditions of great uncertainty. The members of the Hallowell BOH think that they have charted a reasonable path for our city to begin to follow, despite the sacrifices that it requires, and hope the majority of the citizens of Hallowell agree.

We are available for questions or comments. If we disagree, please remember that the enemy right now is the virus, not our politicians, and not each other. Most importantly, we will get through this -- and we will get through this best by working together.

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