

Without widespread acceptance of vaccines, COVID-19 will become a game of Whack-A-Mole

With the election—along with all its manufactured controversies—and the inauguration in the rearview mirror, we need to work on increasing the number of people vaccinated for the coronavirus as quickly as possible.

While trust in the vaccine is lacking in some quarters, we need to remember that there is nothing controversial about the process. We have been receiving vaccinations since Edward Jenner inoculated people with cowpox to prevent them from getting smallpox. The two of us can still see the smallpox vaccination scar on our upper arms.

We were in our late teens when the first polio vaccine was released and remember standing in lines in large gymnasiums to receive our first dose of the vaccine. The development of the polio vaccine was a great achievement. As a result, our parents no longer had to fear the coming of summer and the rapid increase in the number of children infected with polio myelitis. Iron lungs soon became a thing of the past.

We vaccinate our household pets and farm animals against many diseases and never give it a second thought. We need to do the same for the human population to protect against a disease that as of the writing of this column has resulted in more than 400,000 US deaths. We are currently exceeding the 9/11 death toll every day.

While polls indicate that a significant minority of the population says they are reluctant to take the vaccine, we hope resistance will give way fairly quickly once the vaccine is more widely available.

According to Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, achieving herd immunity for the coronavirus could require nearly 90 percent of the population to get the vaccine (<https://tinyurl.com/y3hu3sg3>).

Achieving herd immunity through vaccination programs is key to getting the economy of the US and the rest of the world back on its feet. It is key to restoring the food chains that we all depend upon for our daily sustenance and farmers depend upon for their livelihood.

In the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in the US, the disease was mostly confined to nursing homes and urban areas like New York City. When the concepts of mask wearing and social distancing were introduced, many thought that rural areas with their wide open spaces were safe from the spread of the virus. It turned out that they weren't and sparsely populated states in the middle of the country soon became hot spots for the virus, placing significant pressure on local health institutions.

According to the Wichita Eagle, Kansas started 2021 with the country's highest rate of new COVID-19 reports (<https://tinyurl.com/y2cptdix>). The Great Bend Tribune reported that Stafford County, KS (a place where Harwood lived for more than a decade), with its estimated 2019 population of 4,181 (5.25 people per square mile), has had 7 deaths as the result of COVID-19 (<https://tinyurl.com/yyhaphvv>), for a death rate of 1.7 persons per 1,000 population. At the same time the death rate in the US was 1.2 persons per 1,000 population.

Living in an area with a low population density is no protection against the disease.

As we write this column, two vaccines have been given Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), one developed by Pfizer-BioNTech and the other by Moderna. The vaccines are currently being administered to people in the US.

In addition to those two, three other vaccines are in phase three trials, and if successful, would also be eligible for an EUA. These companies are AstraZeneca, Janssen, and Novavax.

The initial rollout of the vaccines has been slower than expected as the result of a lack of coordination between the federal government and the states. Hopefully this will change with a more hands-on approach by the new administration and an increased supply of the vaccine as more firms are granted EUAs.

With the widespread acceptance of the vaccines, life may be able to return to normal (more likely a NEW normal that looks different from the past) by the end of 2021. Until we reach a 90 percent vaccination rate, we will continue to play Whack-a-Mole with the virus, responding to one hot spot after another.

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