

Healthcare Systems & Services Practice

The next phase of COVID-19 is a battle we can win

It is humanity versus virus, and we are on the cusp of winning, thanks to healthcare and public-sector workers and innovators.

by Navjot Singh



Most of us are optimists or pessimists by nature. But the COVID-19 pandemic has found ways to make both sides question their perspective. Not only is it the biggest public-health emergency in modern times, it has also been a volatile narrative with ample reasons for hope and despair, often on the same day. I was quite pessimistic about the outbreak in January 2020; I glimpsed, if only vaguely, the potential for disaster. In the ensuing months, though, even I have been surprised by just how bad it has become. Over 2.3 million dead, including 465,000 Americans; ten million Americans unemployed; millions more in reduced circumstances. And for each month of delay in getting the virus under control, more will die. And the return of GDP to precrisis levels could be delayed by about two months.

The pandemic is nowhere near over. But my inner pessimist is giving way to a brighter outlook, the result of the astonishing efforts of frontline workers (Boston hospitals have performed admirably) and of scientists and physicians worldwide, including those at Moderna and elsewhere in Greater Boston, as well as Pfizer's and BioNTech's teams in New York and around the world. New vaccines have received emergency-use approval and are in the early stages of rollout. More than 16 million doses have been administered to Americans. Ditto for new therapeutics: eight treatments have been authorized for emergency use. And an army of doctors and researchers around the country has produced a wealth of new knowledge on treatment strategies and procedures. Public-private cooperation at the local level has surged. All those efforts have helped reduce the case fatality rate of COVID-19 in this country from about 10 percent in March 2020 to 1.7 percent today.

This unprecedented effort could soon produce even stronger results and might lower that figure to 0.1 percent sometime in 2021. I don't mean to minimize the severe wave of infections now coursing through the country. Each day seems to bring another 100,000 cases and 1,500 deaths. It is most assuredly going to get worse before it gets better.

The humanitarian cost of this pandemic is staggering. But in spite of it all, as Churchill said, "I am an optimist—it does not seem much use to be anything else."

Why should Boston's business leaders look past today's grim news toward a brighter tomorrow? Start with the public-health interventions that reduce transmission. The public-health community's understanding of the benefit of masks, physical distancing, and travel restrictions, as well as the risk levels of various activities, improves all the time. And new confidence-boosting measures are on the way. Regulatory agencies have recently approved at-home tests. Coupled with digital enablers, these disposable isothermal and antigen-based tests should help people quickly confirm that they are healthy and give them confidence to reengage in life.

Case-management guidelines, a second reason for optimism, have vastly improved and could soon get even better. Today, more help is on the way: More than 390 unique therapeutic agents have been reviewed by the Food and Drug Administration. McKinsey research suggests that, based on historical patterns, several may be deemed effective, and could be approved for wide distribution.

The arrival of approved vaccines seemed to many to herald the end of the pandemic. But their rollout has not gone as well as hoped. The logistical problems are daunting; and many (perhaps 100 million) Americans are reluctant to get the shot. However, the pace of vaccination should continue to accelerate as the healthcare system builds experience and infrastructure, particularly in the "cold chain" of supply that today's vaccines require. And new research shows that about 45 percent of Americans are in "wait and see" mode; when they are reassured by their doctors, when they see their friends getting the vaccine safely, when they see respected scientists and political leaders getting vaccinated on social media, many may be ready to move off the sidelines.

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The tenacity of the novel coronavirus has shaken the confidence of even staunch optimists. But let’s not forget the extraordinary progress we have made or lose our focus on the gains coming down the pike. Someday soon, with case fatality falling further, people may feel comfortable resuming their normal

routines. Business leaders would do well to plan for that day. Mark your calendars now. Here in Boston, as in cities across America, our collective success depends on business and community leaders’ willingness to do what’s needed to support the vaccine rollout and reinvigorate the local economy.

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