

COVID-19 UPDATE 7/17/2020

As cases continue to skyrocket in many parts of the country that did not follow reopening guidelines, we know from states that DID follow the guidelines (with degree of reopening based on control of COVID in the area) that they do work.

Presently 137,000 people have died of COVID in the US, and at the current trajectory, that will reach 250,000 by November. South Carolina is now fourth in the US, behind Florida, Arizona and Louisiana, in per capita number of cases. (If SC were a country, we'd be fourth in the world.) Currently 3.5 million people have tested positive in the US. The number infected is estimated to be ten times that. Masks do appear to prevent disease and may also decrease the severity of disease by decreasing the inoculum of virus to which one is exposed.

Recent articles in the local newspapers have notified the public that hospitalizations and deaths are at an all-time high in the upstate and that ICU beds are now short. On Friday July 17, Mayor Knox White and medical directors from Bon Secours and Prisma Health held a press conference in downtown Greenville at which they pleaded for the public to follow the recommended preventive measures (masks, hand sanitizer, distancing) to prevent the hospitals from being overwhelmed. Friday had the highest number of new cases in SC so far.

Governor McMaster continues to encourage wearing masks, but does not mandate them, and is insisting on schools re-opening. At Wednesday's (July 15) press conference, he announced that all schools must be open for in-person attendance full time and suggested delaying opening until Sept. 8 to allow more time to do that safely. He called on State Superintendent Molly Spearman to reject any school reopening plans that did not accomplish that. However, Spearman subsequently announced that she will proceed with allowing local school districts to make the decision. Greenville County has a four-phase plan, based on COVID activity, which, if followed, will result in only online classes in August. On Friday July 17, bishops from six different denominations, representing almost a million South Carolinians, and including our ELCA SC Synod Bishop Rev. Herman Yoos, signed a letter sent to Gov. McMaster opposing his directive for full-time in-person school re-opening this fall.

As of Monday July 13, sale of alcohol in bars, restaurants and other establishments in SC was limited to an 11 PM cut-off by Executive Order to decrease late night congregating in those locations.

President Trump has not addressed the epidemic aggressively, including refusing to encourage the wearing of masks or regularly do so himself. States, local governments, and retail chains are stepping in with their own mask requiring regulations. While the governors of Alabama and Montana mandated masks, Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia declared such local laws to be illegal. More national retail chains including Walmart, Kroger, Kohls', Starbucks, Best Buy, CVS, Target, Home Depot and others, have made masks mandatory for employees and customers, as has Haywood Mall according to signs posted on the doors. Immediate adoption of universal mask wearing would bring the epidemic under control within 4-8 weeks.

This week it was announced that as of Wednesday July 15, reporting of cases would no longer be collected by the CDC, but will go directly to HHS, so as to streamline federal distribution of PPE and other supplies, including vaccines when available. However, it raises a concern for the additional workload, at least in the short term, of already overwhelmed staff learning the new reporting mechanism, as well as the possible politicizing of reporting.

Research continues to search for effective treatment but the currently available modalities (remdesivir, dexamethasone, convalescent antibody plasma) improve outcomes but are not a cure.

Vaccine trials are moving full speed ahead. In the Upstate, Moderna is beginning a spike protein messenger RNA vaccine trial, screening volunteers by telephone at present, with in-person screening and administration of vaccine or placebo to begin July 27. The various vaccine companies are producing vaccines in quantity even as they test them, so as to be able to roll out massive vaccination programs as soon as the vaccine is proven safe and effective. So far, we know some vaccines are safe and produce antibody, but don't know that the antibody is protective, or for how long.

Herd immunity may or may not occur with this coronavirus. There are populations in the US where early COVID was very prevalent where the community positive antibody rate is above 60% but it remains to be seen if that is protective (for many coronaviruses, unfortunately, it is not.)

There are too many cases in SC now for case contract tracing to be practical, so the only reason to get tested for symptoms at this point is for severe illness (shortness of breath, blue lips, fingers or toes, or confusion being hallmarks) that would indicate the need for hospitalization. If exposed, individuals need to notify recent (past 2 weeks) contacts, self-quarantine for 14 days, and contact their doctor (or me) for more information about what to look for, when and how to get tested, and whether to seek emergency medical care.

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