



# Cyril H. Wecht: Time to end the COVID-19 hysteria

The pandemic can be contained without draconian measures and overreaction

CYRIL H. WECHT

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An ever-increasing number of United States citizens are beginning to raise questions about how long the widely imposed quarantines and restrictive measures regarding COVID-19 will remain in place. How much longer can we continue to function as a civilized society with government-imposed, legally enforced restrictive measures that significantly and adversely impact upon our daily lives? How long are such measures sustainable?

As a physician specializing in forensic pathology, I am well aware of the importance of preventive health care measures and the tragedy of death. In every one of the 21,000 autopsies that I have performed over the past 63 years, I have always thought about that decedent's life and what the significance of that death is likely to have been to family, friends and society.

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However, at the same time, as a sensitive and caring human being, husband, father and grandparent, I am also very much aware of what it means to be alive, enjoying and appreciating being with family and friends. Accordingly, I am rather puzzled by the limited amount of coverage that I have noted in the four daily newspapers that I receive regarding what the deleterious effects are among the living as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and what I consider to be the degree of hysteria and panic that has developed in association with this viral phenomenon. Accordingly, I would like to suggest that people stand back and calmly and objectively reflect upon the price society is paying for this widespread ongoing sequestration.

Julian Routh

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Think about the world of academia where high school and college graduation ceremonies have been canceled, graduates are unable to obtain interviews for new jobs and high school graduates are not certain as to whether their college careers will commence for the 2020-21 school year. Think about all the athletic events, from elementary school through high school, college and the professional world, that have been canceled.

What about the marked limitation of medical services, e.g., elective surgery and regular medical checkups? How can even the most astute diagnostician be certain as to whether a particular pathological process should be operated upon or how some evolving systemic disease process may be developing?

What about the legal processes in our society, such as people seeking justice and legal relief in cases ranging from divorce and separation to first-degree homicide? How long can these cases be held in abeyance? What about cases that require jury trials — when will they be reconstituted?

For people who are deeply religious and find solace and comfort in their theological practices — whether at a church, synagogue or mosque — what about their daily prayers and opportunities to meet and seek comfort in the presence of their priest, minister, rabbi or imam?

Picture a family in which the father-husband is a physical abuser and psychological terror. How would you like to be the spouse or children in such a household day after day over a period of many months?

COVID-19

Continuing coverage of the outbreak

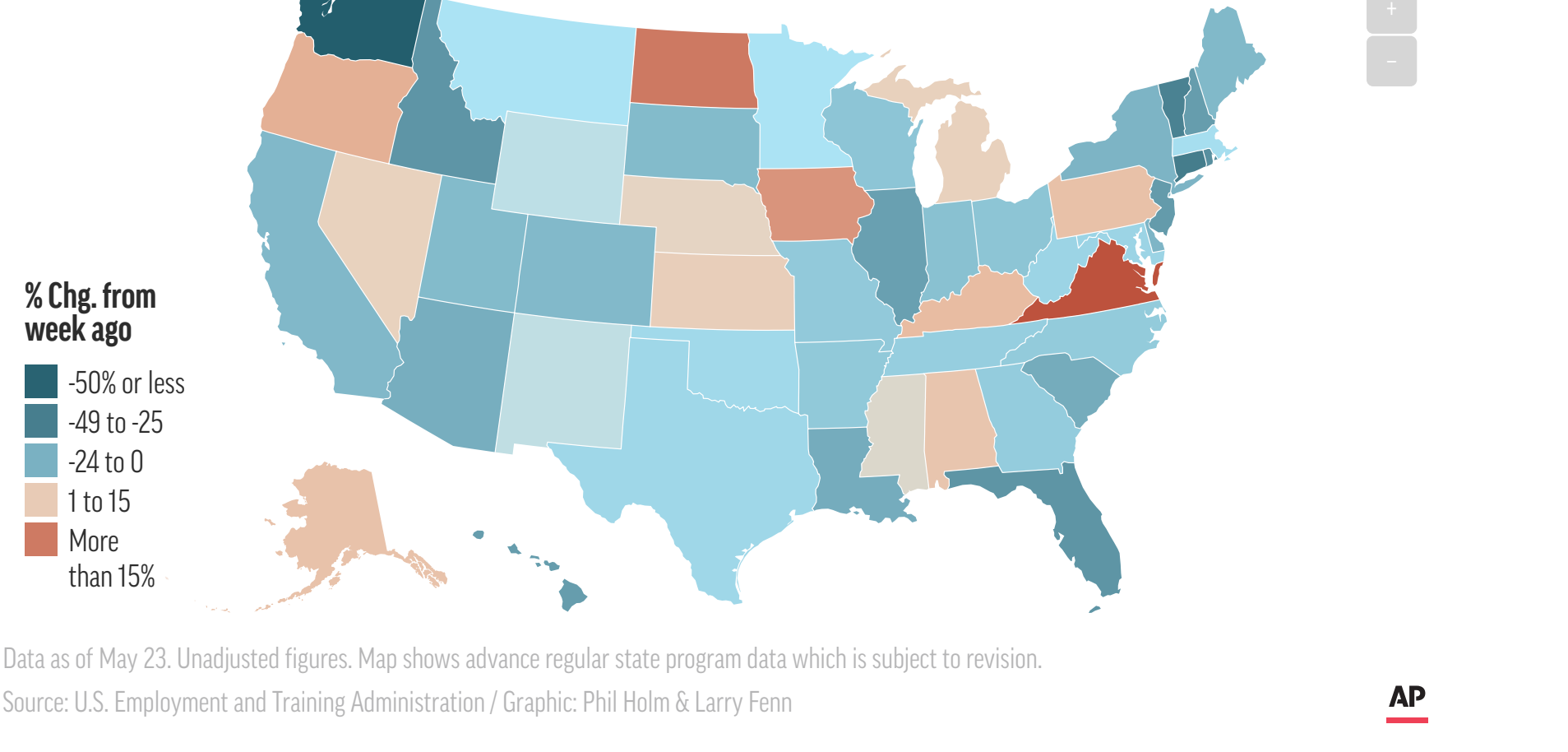
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At this time, there are more than 33 million people in the United States who have applied for unemployment benefits, many of whom were individuals working for wages less than \$15 per hour with no bank accounts or other sources of financial assistance. How are they supposed to continue functioning? How many times a week do they line up in their cars and wait several hours to receive a box of food for their families?

Reportedly, 1 out of every 5 children in the United States is not receiving enough food. During the mental and physical development of the next generation of American citizens, what does this mean to our future?

In the meantime, there is an increased number of suicides and a yet to be determined increased number of people suffering psychotic and severe neurological reactions due to prolonged quarantines, societal restrictions, loss of jobs and other markedly abnormal impingements upon their daily lives.

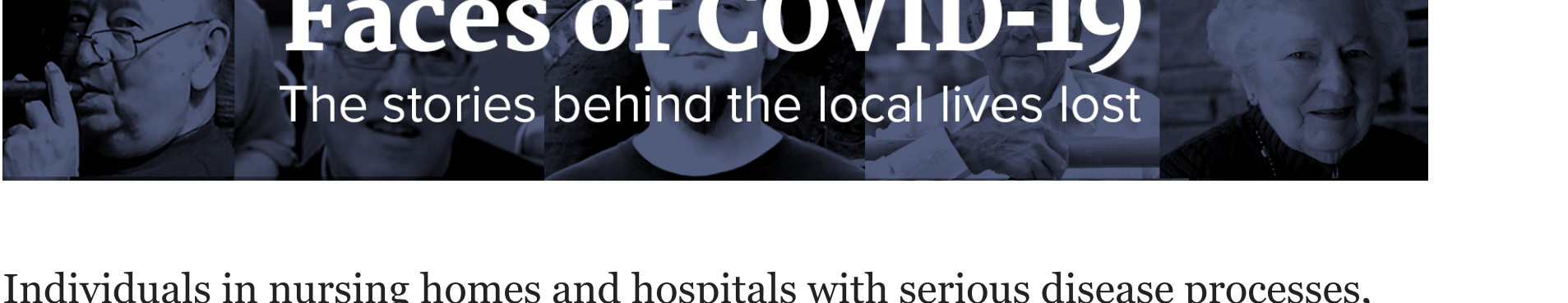


Picture yourself with a dying parent or grandparent whom you are not able to visit or touch and caress because they have tested positive for COVID-19, or because their doctor fears you may transmit that infection to them. I remember the terminal illnesses of my parents and mother-in-law and cannot imagine what it would have been like if I had not been able to visit with them and to hug and kiss them in their dying days.

I heartily agree with the need to protect our disabled and elderly populations and individuals who are more susceptible to the ravages of the coronavirus because of chronic respiratory, cardiovascular and other systemic disease processes. However, I strongly believe that this must be done in a more-focused fashion. Special efforts, time, money and health care services must be devoted to these groups. This can be accomplished without imposing the widespread restrictions that we are experiencing throughout much of the United States and certainly here in Pennsylvania.

The fact of the matter is that, as far as we know at this time, the mortality rate of individuals with COVID-19 infections may range as low as 0.1% and most probably does not exceed 1%.

I think of the widespread diseases I have dealt with as a medical student and pathologist through the years into the present time — polio, tuberculosis, HIV-AIDS, various influenza epidemics, SARS, MERS, Ebola, Zika. I have performed countless autopsies on individuals with all kinds of infectious disease processes that required me to be cautious and careful for myself and my assistants. However, these serious diseases have been dealt with in the past several decades without closing down society. According to the website for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 61,000 deaths attributed to influenza in the 2018-19 season. Somehow we dealt with that epidemic without closing down society.



Individuals in nursing homes and hospitals with serious disease processes, especially the elderly, in many instances are not receiving the care that is needed because of medical attention being diverted to the COVID-19 situation. In fact, we are learning that many deaths of such individuals are being attributed to COVID-19 without a diagnosis having been made in a scientific fashion.

Very regrettably, the COVID-19 situation has come to be heavily politicized by both the right and left wings of American politics. I firmly believe that if everything we are experiencing were to have taken place last year or next year, in the absence of presidential, U.S. Senate and congressional races, gubernatorial elections, etc., the level of fear and conservation would be much less than what we are experiencing in light of the upcoming elections in November.

So what is the essence of my beliefs and message? Deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in a thoroughly planned, meticulously orchestrated, highly focused fashion, concentrating on those groups of individuals who are more susceptible. At the same time, we must begin to lift up restrictions, end quarantines and commence normal activities across the board in all fields of endeavor.

We have an obligation to save lives, but we also have the responsibility and right to enjoy our lives and to not compromise the lives of non-COVID-19 infected individuals. More than 90% of people who develop COVID-19 infections have no symptomatology or awareness of their illness at all, or only suffer the equivalent of a two- to three-day cold.

The time to dispense with panic and hysteria has arrived. A return to a functioning civilized society is now overdue. The overall restrictive measures that have been imposed are simply unsustainable.

*Cyril H. Wecht served for more than two decades as Allegheny County coroner and medical examiner.*

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