

Transcription

Production	Conversations COVID 19
Episode	One / Social Distancing
Duration	15'15"
Deliver format	H264

Welcome to Conversations COVID-19, the program that discusses and explores the physical and social impacts of the virus on our community here in Skagit County in the Pacific Northwest. In this first episode, we're going to be looking at what is probably one of the biggest issues – the issue of social distancing – and here to discuss this with me are Jennifer Johnson, who is the Director of Public Health for Skagit County, and Dr. Howard Leibrand, the county Health Officer for Skagit County.

First of all, welcome. Thanks for joining us on this program.

Jennifer, could I start off with you – What lead you to put this project together?

Jennifer

I would say first and foremost, would be to support the community. I want to be able to provide practical information and strategies that can be applied to everyday life. I want to be able to support the connectivity of public health with our community and support the connectivity of community with community. I'm hoping that this is a good way to provide information that goes beyond the science and facts of the virus and takes a deeper look at the social impacts of the outbreak now and those that we might face going forward. I also think it's a wonderful platform that we can celebrate some of the good things that are already taking place in our community. So many people and partners – they're already stepping up. They're really coming together. Which is kind of a good thing through something difficult like this.

John

And the call centers and stuff – you must be absolutely inundated with questions – what are some of the key questions that you're being asked these days?

Jennifer

You know, I would say, without a doubt, most of the questions, in some sort of way, link to social distancing. Social distancing is hard for people. They don't know how that really, beyond the guidelines, how do they apply that to their daily lives.

John

And Dr Leibrand, why is social distancing so important?

Dr Leibrand

Well, in a virus, there's a number, it's called the R naught – it's the infectivity factor of the virus, and that tells us, for every infection we have, how many new people in context of that infection, then become infected. With some diseases like Measles for example, that's as high as 18. With this disease, with COVID-19, it is about 2.3 percent. 2.3 people per contact then get infected, and then likewise, those 2.3 people infect each another 2.3. So you have exponential growth of the amount of virus. And in fact, this virus doubles approximately every 6 days, the number of people infected. So, our only weapon against this virus right now is social distancing and personal hygiene. And we don't have any medications which routinely work to prevent the illness. We don't have a vaccine that's readily available yet, and we don't have personal immunity so social distancing is the most important thing that we can do and it's within all of our abilities to do. And if we are successful in social distancing and personal hygiene, then, instead of each infected person in turn infecting another 2.3 people, we can get that number down around 1, below 1 even, and then the exponential growth of the virus infection in the society – in the community, will drop and gradually – and we call that bending the curve, where instead of a steep, upward slope, we have a gradual upward slope. And the reason that is so important is that if we have a very fast onset of infection in the community, soon we get enough patients where our medical system is overwhelmed, and particularly with this disease, if we don't have access to state-of-the-art medical care, way more people die from the infection. So, our goal in all of social distancing and personal hygiene is to bend that curve, so that less people get infected from each person that's infected, so that the onset is slower and we never exceed the medical capabilities of our hospitals.

John

Thanks. Jennifer, the messaging that's going out, in particular, about social distancing – are people taking this seriously, in Skagit County?

Jennifer

Yeah - You know, that's tough to say. Unfortunately, I would say, not as much as I would hope. I think we're seeing a lot of great strides in the workplace. I think a lot of employers are putting in strategies, such as telecommuting, staggered work schedules. You're seeing as a mere fact of the cancellation of events that that's forcing people to not connect. But I know I'm not the only one that drives around and sees still quite a few cars in parking lots. I think it's hard to apply it to our personal lives. We see the guidelines and we think it's for them but not for us and even if we're high risk sometimes we don't see it for us. A lot more people have time off of school, time off of work, and I'm hearing people still saying, "I think this is a great time to go on a little vacation", "It's a good time to go visit Grandma" or go visit a family member. And I'm also seeing, people are doing things like watching their church service online, but inviting neighbors and friends. And, maybe trying to get to some of those errands that they haven't been able to get to, like changing the tires on their car or taking the snow tires off and really encourage that we all take a time to just pause and really reflect on what's essential, what is truly essential in our life. I know that when family gatherings and social gatherings are cancelled, it's super disappointing. Spring break's coming, I know so many families have trips that are cancelled, there's uncertainty with graduations, but it's really important that we apply these guidelines to ourselves, and stay in our homes as much as we can.

John

I understand the importance of social distancing, but what kind of impact is that having on people?

Jennifer

I would say there's a general sense of unsettlement in our community for people young and old through the lifespan. It's not just impacting those that are high risk. There's uncertainty – these are pretty significant changes that have happened in such a small period of time. At Public Health our first priority is to protect health and safety. That's kind of an underlying goal and priority of all the work that we do, but these social distancing guidelines weren't made lightly. We understand that there are social impacts to these, as we hunker down means we're more isolated; when we're more isolated we're lonely. When people are lonely, they experience more anxiety and vulnerability and it really can be a ripple effect, and what we think we can handle today, might look different tomorrow. And so, the impacts of social distancing are evolving, and I think it's a really important time to let people know that you care about them and to reach out.

John

I think it's particularly difficult with the messaging because it's an invisible entity – it's not something tangible that you can see, so it's very hard to convince people of it.

Jennifer

I think a lot of people too – see themselves as not high-risk, or their children not as high-risk. And so, they don't necessarily think that those guidelines apply to them, but what we're forgetting about is, even if you're low-risk, and even if you get ill and have minor symptoms, you still can infect other people, and that's really impacting our vulnerable population. And, if we can all just stop, take a pause, and implement the guidelines, then the sooner we can get back to some sort of normalcy.

John

And speaking of vulnerability, who are the most vulnerable?

Dr Leibrand

As we age, we are more vulnerable. So, if you look at the people above 60, they are more vulnerable than the people below 60. And then with each decade, that climbs. I can't give you specific numbers because we really don't know the specific numbers for our population. We can extrapolate from other populations, but the hard fact there is that this is a much more dangerous disease for the elderly. And, I don't really want to include myself in that category but I'm 65 so I'm in one of the higher-risk categories. The other – chronic illness is another risk factor. People with diabetes, people with high blood pressure, people with lung disease. Pregnant women – we are being ultra conservative with them just because of what's at risk.

The disease really hasn't shown to be terribly dangerous to pregnant women but there's a lot at stake there so we've put them in the high-risk category.

John

What are you seeing at the county level at this stage? Are there any kind of patterns, unique to Skagit?

Dr Leibrand

Well we had the distinct opportunity, I think, to watch this develop in adjacent counties and with the knowledge that we learned from there, we were a little bit ahead of the curve with instituting social distancing guidelines. Then the entire state caught up with the governor's proclamations about this but, I think we were lucky to have instituted them when we did. We still haven't – they haven't been in place long enough to know the effect. We are getting suggestions that the curve is slowing down but it's nothing that has sustained for a long enough period of time that we can say for sure. Now, having said that, the caveat is that changes we put in to place two weeks ago would only now be showing their effect. Another way to say that is, everyone who's showing up with the disease today – they were infected two weeks ago, before the guidelines were in place. So, there's a lag time before we can actually see our success. And that's one of the reasons we need to press on, be patient, and continue doing what we're doing and even more, just to ensure that we've had these in place long enough to really see some effect.

John

Jennifer, what advice do you have for the more vulnerable people in the population, both emotionally and socially?

Jennifer

Yeah. So, I think what's most important for the vulnerable population is to try and be connected as much as possible. You know, especially older adults, they really look forward to the visits from family members and neighbors, and they're not able to have that interaction. I think we can all reach out and support those that are more vulnerable as well. I think we have a responsibility to find out if they're prepared, do they have the items at home that they need, and how can we help, because sometimes giving can also be satisfying, and increase our wellbeing as well. I know a lot of us feel pretty inundated with information, but some vulnerable populations, especially older adults may not have the connectivity that we do to the web and social media and the internet. And the guidelines are changing sometimes almost daily. It can be pretty overwhelming about how to implement that but I certainly encourage people to let each other know that you care about each other. When in doubt, instead of texting, pick up a phone. The voice is better than a text message and even better than that would be video chat. So, finding some creative ways to connect with all people.

John

Thanks. Dr. Leibrand, setting expectations, can we just talk about sustainability?

Dr Leibrand

So this is not something that's going to pass within a week or two. We can expect, just from looking at the other countries where they've gone through the same experience, we can expect this to last weeks. And again, sustaining the effort at social distancing is very important to get the results that we want, and I think that it's going to be even more obvious as time goes on that what we're doing is the right thing to do. And again, we can learn from other nations and it's not time to start having parties again yet.

John

Jennifer, is there any upside to this?

Jennifer

You know, that's funny you ask, I was thinking about that the other day. I think so many of us live – kind of run the rat race, we're super busy. Yeah, I think there is a silver lining to this. I think that it'll allow us to focus more on self-care, maybe look more towards our own health and wellbeing, and that of our families. If we're spending more time at home, which we all should be, then we have more of an opportunity to connect with those in our household, instead of getting our connectivity outside of the home. I know for myself, the other day, my family, we played a game of UNO – card game UNO, I haven't played that since I was 12 years old, and it really was quite fun. And so, I think there's an upside too of our community, finding solutions and supporting each other, as we see the ripple effect of this. Potentially, go out and do the economic vitality of our community and how we can together, bring each other up.

John

Thanks – What considerations would you take into account to possibly lift any of the guidelines that are currently in place, what would it take to do that?

Dr Leibrand

Well, like I said, there's a 2-week delay in any of the measurable responses. So, once you start seeing measurable responses of success in bending the curve, to use that phrase, I think that you can start re-instating some activities. Again, it's not going to be just one day we announce that 'you're going back to work', 'you're going back to school', but I think that we will gradually relieve the more strict and the more prohibitive things that we've done. I think that there is social harm to a lot of the things that we've done even if we're careful about how we do them. But, it's outweighed by the protection that it gives us from the virus. So we need to – I think the first things that would be – the first bans that would be lifted are the things that maybe we found don't make that much difference, or maybe we found that they make a bigger harmful difference than we thought. So, I think it's going to be a balance of that. Again, looking to the other nations that have done this, and watching what happens in their communities, will give us an answer to that as time goes on.

John

There are so many aspects to this virus, both medically and emotionally and socially, so I look forward to discussing more issues with you. Thank you.

Dr Leibrand

Thank you.

End titles: