

Medical Lockdown Will Cause a Disease Surge

Patients who are sick with conditions other than Covid-19 aren't seeking screening and treatment.

By Jeff LeBenger and Mike Meyer

May 11, 2020 6:12 pm ET

With most of the nation still on lockdown, many people are missing regular screenings and checkups with their doctors. Some may be experiencing early symptoms of illness, yet aren't seeking treatment. The effects of a six-week delay are surmountable in most cases, but a six-month delay would lead to much sicker patients and dramatic increases in death rates for major illnesses such as cancer. The number of people who die as a result of these delays could end up rivaling or exceeding deaths due to Covid-19. Adding to this potential crisis is that health systems and medical providers are incurring substantial losses, which will impede their ability to provide care.

Much is being written about the potential of Covid-19 to return aggressively in the fall, assuming it recedes during the summer. But there may be a major aftershock that could throw the health system into further crisis: a flood of patients with other illnesses who are much sicker than they would be had they not delayed visits to their doctors for fear of coronavirus exposure. Health-care executives and policy experts should focus on serving this potential "third wave" of sick patients or the good feelings from having flattened the Covid-19 curve may be short-lived.

We have experienced the trauma and collateral damage of Covid-19. One of us (Mr. Meyer) is based in Scottsdale, Ariz., and recently suffered the death of his father because of delayed diagnosis and treatment. Dr. LeBenger, based in New York City, has seen thousands of patients with Covid-19 while dealing with delayed treatment for many others. We both face uncertainty about the future of our practices; one runs a small business whose revenues have plunged, and the other a large medical group with million-dollar losses.

Stopping Covid-19 is critical. It's also essential to plan for the coming wave of patients who are extremely sick with something other than Covid. Here's what government and industry should do to prepare:

- Start public awareness campaigns to promote the message that people shouldn't delay seeking care for suspicious symptoms. In the past few months, new cancer diagnoses have dropped by an estimated 30% according to Dr. Benjamin Neel, director of the Perlmutter Cancer Center at NYU Langone.
- Reassure patients who may be avoiding care because they fear catching Covid-19 in doctors' offices that expanded testing and other measures make it possible to be treated in a safe environment.
- Offer additional financial and technical support for providers to design and accelerate telemedicine and patient triage programs.
- Allow physicians who are licensed in one state to practice in others. Make permanent the emergency exceptions for qualified medical personnel.

- Encourage partnerships among providers, insurers, pharmaceutical companies and employers to improve coordination and quality of care.
- Make reimbursement rates for a physician's services the same regardless of where a patient receives treatment—at a doctor's office or over video platforms—so patients make decisions based on the care they need, not how much they may have to pay out of pocket.
- Allow anyone who has lost private insurance as a result of being laid off to enroll in Medicaid or obtain an Affordable Care Act policy for a limited time so they do not delay seeking treatment.
- Provide community-based support through senior centers, YMCAs and other organizations to promote mental health and early identification of worsening symptoms in chronic conditions.

It's hard to plan for the future in the middle of an earthquake. But without nailing down some of these reforms now, the aftershocks of Covid-19 are likely to be deadlier than necessary.

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