

We need COVID measures we can trust

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It is curious that the only recent indicator I have seen that COVID-19 still stalks us is that Kyle Connor and Nate Schmidt of the Winnipeg Jets were placed in virus protocol last week.

I do not know what Canada's self-styled virologists in chief (Stefanson, Kenney, Ford et al) were thinking when they declared the pandemic over. Even more puzzling over is the decision in Manitoba to cease sharing daily updates on the prevalence of COVID-19.

Judging by the general traffic and the full parking lots outside restaurants, many Manitobans seem convinced COVID-19 is over and done. With warming temperatures predicted in the next week, Manitobans will surely be hyperactive after a difficult winter. And who knows, they may be right.

But wait — COVID-19 is a wily witch. New Zealand, the poster child for pandemic control, has just emerged from a dramatic surge in cases that caught everyone by surprise. In Hong Kong, many have died, mostly unvaccinated seniors, in a spike that has spread to Shenzhen, immediately adjacent on the mainland.

China has suspended much of its rail service to contain the virus, a move that will further disrupt already-fractured supply chains, especially in electronics.

Three weeks after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared "Freedom Day Mark Two," new hospital admissions for COVID-19 in the U.K. rose by 25 per cent, with case rates doubling every two weeks. Many contracted the virus while in hospital for other conditions.

Two factors appear to be the root of the surge in the U.K., Europe and even Canada, according to wastewater testing in Ontario. First is the existence of "stealth Omicron," or the BA.2 variant, that appears more contagious than the original BA.1. and has become the prevalent strain. Second is waning immunity even for those with the booster.

The "miracle" of the rapid vaccine development in 2021 seems old news, and even a fourth shot may have limited capacity to prevent widespread illness if a new permutation of the virus emerges.

My sense is that fear of COVID-19 has abated. In my circle, increasing numbers have "tested positive" and recovered, even elderly friends with serious medical conditions. It seems lockdown fatigue and fatalism have spread. Many seem to think it's inevitable that they will get it.

If we experience another COVID-19 resurgence in the next couple of months (and frankly I have forgotten whether that would be the fourth, fifth, or sixth wave), we cannot afford a general lockdown. The impact of the past two years on the academic and social development of children has been dire. I also expect any draconian measures will drive a further wedge in our society.

So, what should we do?

Throughout the pandemic, I have resented the paternalism of our political class. I resent being treated as a child by politicians unqualified to be my parent. It has been hard to discern the science behind the decisions, especially when talking head experts on TV offer a range of opinions.

How much easier would life have been for political leaders had they pointed to objective data and linked regulations to indicators of the incidence and prevalence of the virus? Even better, just release timely data, don't impose regulations, and let me decide.

I want a measure of COVID-19 prevalence by community. The only viable approach seems to be sampling waste water, and more communities are adopting this as part of disease surveillance and an early warning for COVID-19.

My weather app offers me a UV index and air-quality indicator. Imagine if I could get a daily reading of COVID-19 prevalence on my phone. Politicians could link control measures to this index, which would offer the electorate an independent check on policy direction. Even better, I could decide whether to mask up while buying groceries or attend a Rolling Stones rave party at the seniors' centre.

The key is that I would have current data upon which to assess risk and take responsibility for my health, as I was instructed to do just a few weeks ago.