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Some lessons already learned?

EDITORIAL

THERE'S SURELY NO DOUBT that once the COVID-19 pandemic finally subsides there will be inquiries into what could have been done to prevent the horrendous death toll across the world and here in Canada.

The need for the inquiries should be obvious, particularly when the experts are predicting a second wave of the coronavirus next fall, likely coinciding with the annual influenza season.

However, we need not wait weeks or months to begin looking into how it is that some countries, states, provinces and cities did so much better than others in combating the virus about which so little was known because of its novelty.

For example, how was it that South Korea, with nearly twice Canada's population, has as of this week had just 254 deaths, compared with more than 4,000 here. and Taiwan, with a current population of 24 million, had just six?

Even in the United States, with by far the world's highest death toll at more than 70,000, California had about 2,400 deaths among its 40 million residents while New York State, with half the population, has had about 25,000.

And in Canada, Quebec has the highest death toll at about 2,300 while next door in New Brunswick none have been reported.

One thing that's now obvious is that the epicentre of the outbreaks in both Ontario and Quebec are the two provinces' long-term care facilities. But while some might say this was inevitable, the truth of the matter is that you don't have to go to New Brunswick to find areas that have nursing homes with no COVID-19 deaths.

The Globe and Mail disclosed last week that in the Kingston area none of the 26 care facilities has had a COVID-19 case, let alone a death.

The explanation given is that on the day after the Province ordered the closure of all bars and restaurants, the local public health unit ordered the unit's six restaurant inspectors to turn their attention to the nursing homes to make sure they had the staff, testing and personal protection equipment needed to prevent outbreaks.

Clearly, that's not what happened in the Greater Toronto Area, where we learn almost daily of caregivers who were wholly unprepared to deal with outbreaks, most of them not having the personal protective equipment, to the point where in some nursing homes most of the staffs as well as a majority of the residents had the virus.

Perhaps the three most important lessons learned to date are the need to listen to expert advice, the importance of having a good stockpile of medical supplies for health care workers to treat pandemic victims safely, and the need to have effective testing, without which you never know how widespread an outbreak has become.

Even today, South Korea seems to be about the only place where most of the inhabitants have been tested. And it's only within the last week that initial testing for antibodies in New York City showed that about 20 per cent of the population had become infected, or many times the number of reported cases.

And thanks to the lead story in a recent 60 Minutes, we learned that a Toronto firm most people have never heard of was able to use artificial intelligence to forewarn its clients that the pandemic was coming.

The company is BlueDot, which developed an algorithm that scours the world for outbreaks of infectious disease. It's a digital early warning system, and it was among the first to raise alarms about this lethal outbreak.

They call their new weapon ?outbreak science,? and it has already led to calls for an overhaul of how governments operate.

Said the 60 Minutes report: ?It was New Year's Eve when BlueDot's computer spat out an alert: a Chinese business paper had just reported 27 cases of a mysterious flu-like disease in Wuhan, a city of 11 million. The signs were ominous. Seven people were already in hospitals.

?Chinese officials were secretive about what was happening. But BlueDot's computer doesn't rely on official statements. Their algorithm was already churning through data, including medical bulletins, even livestock reports, to predict where the virus would go next.?

BluDot's clients at the time included South Korea, but not the U.S.