

Bacteria and Viruses Don't Belong To Political Parties

When a bacteria or a virus becomes a political hot potato, you know that something is not quite right in both the worlds of medical science and politics. In fact, it reflects a warping of the thought in America when the public's health turns into such a divisive issue.

Bacteria and viruses are sources of infection. They do not vote, they do not think. Furthermore, the control of infectious diseases has been one of the greatest scientific achievements of the last 100 years. In fact, the treatment of infection in times past has been a great unifier with all parties interested in a positive outcome. Federalists, Whigs, Copperheads, Bull-Moose, Democrats and Republicans came together to fight diseases such as small pox, yellow fever or the Spanish flu. They realized that infection does not care how liberal or conservative your politics are. Today we have a new and ominous political take on just about everything. Where infection is concerned, it is particularly disturbing.

Let's start with Ebola since this has been headlining the news. The number one goal of the US Centers for Disease Control should be protecting the lives and safety of American citizens. Don't get me wrong, I realize no other country in the world can do outreach and aid nations like the US and we should do what we can to stop this disease at its source in West Africa. But, our first duty is to America and her citizens. To date, I have not heard a reasonable explanation as to why we cannot eliminate entry of individuals from West Africa without twenty one day quarantine. Just this week, it was announced that all travelers from West African countries must be processed through 5 airports in order to undergo tighter screening. However, this screening – an oral history and body temperature – is unlikely to yield adequate intervention because someone could suppress a temperature or not be febrile on entry into the US. I am happy that at least it's a step in the right direction. But the problem is that through this entire fiasco, the CDC has been wrong at so many levels. The CDC has lost the trust of the American public and the American physician. From undetermined gowning techniques, to letting known people at risk travel by air, to the appointment of a politician with no medical experience as Czar, the process seems to be political theatre. Medicine is a hard science. You can do historical studies, as well as unblinded and blinded studies. You can assess cause and effect with a reasonable chance of finding truth. We know that isolation techniques have worked for hundreds of years. They are simple and cost effective. Yes, we can continue to help stricken countries while quarantine is in effect. It has just been reported, African nations themselves have stopped the disease using the technique of quarantine. I don't see this as a Democratic or Republican issue. Let's not frame it that way.

How about something a little less publicized? What about enterovirus D68? This is the virus affecting American children with paralytic symptoms and death. In case you don't know, enteroviruses are quite common and cause various symptoms depending on the strain. D68 was first discovered in California in the 1960's. According to the Division of Viral Diseases at the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Disease, this serotype is one of the most rarely reported in the US. There have been only 26 reports from 1970-2006 or 36 years. There are now 700 reported cases this year. We are told there is no correlation between the increases in D68 cases with the sudden immigration of tens of thousands of children across our border. This may be so, but it is more than a little curious that the timing is so exact. It is also interesting that

3% of nose and throat swab samples taken from children of Latin America under 8 years of age contain this virus. When the CDC says there is no correlation, is this a medical science comment or a political science comment? I want to believe the CDC, but the mask of trust has been removed. There is a huge immigration debate going on in our country and we need to know what is science and what is political manipulation.

Finally, what about that age old disease previously known as consumption or tuberculosis? The world mortality for this disease is about 15%. When considering infections, only HIV is a more prolific killer. All age groups are at risk, but it is primarily active in young adults; 80% of those crossing the border are, in fact, young adults. The people hit hardest in America will be HIV patients, cancer patients and the elderly. An amazing number of illegals come from countries with multi-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB). The countries of origin of these individuals are riddled with MDR-TB in children and adults. Extensively Drug Resistant TB (XDR-TB) is even worse, accounting for 10% of cases, particularly in Central and South America. In case you don't know, MDR-TB is a real problem and does not respond well to treatment. Treatment includes expensive drugs with severe side effects. XDR-TB does not respond well even when treated with second line drugs; death is a real fear. Drug resistant TB has doubled in several southern counties of Texas, the area directly adjacent to the Mexican Border.

Yes, we screen immigrants entering the US. But what about those entering in "non-conventional ways". Even the use of the phrase "illegal immigrants" denotes that this article may contain a politically incorrect reference, when all I am trying to express is that the individual did not come in through legal governmental means.

We have a huge problem. As a society, in order to make the appropriate decisions, we need to be able to discuss cause and effect in an open manner without being labeled as racists, luddites, left-wingers, right-wingers, wing-nuts, extremists, Nazis, commies and a myriad of other terms to delegitimize someone with a valid concern. We need to be able to trust someone with deeper knowledge to wade through these concepts. We need someone to act as a referee of competing thoughts. Physicians, should be above this fray, trying to move ahead based on the best science of the time. We need to make public health decisions in a reasonable manner. We need to make judgments without fear of causing histrionics from those with political agendas. Not every thought or idea is infused with malevolence from the "other side". The above stats lay out a pretty stark case for the risks associated with unregulated immigration. No matter what path we choose to deal with our national problems, we need to set up a mechanism AHEAD OF TIME to deal with the consequences of that decision. For every decision we make will surely affect the next generation of Americans, who frequently are not yet able to defend themselves.

If we continue to persist in politicizing each aspect of our lives, people will naturally choose sides based on ideology. Instead of decisions based on common sense and scientific solutions, emotions will rule decisions and tragic consequences will result. Without understanding the underlying issues we cannot plan ahead, to escape easily avoidable mistakes. A bacteria and a virus do not care about political beliefs, let's not treat them and their sequelae as political animals.

---Reed S. Wilson, MD, FACC, FACP, President of Private Practice Doctors, LLC