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One planet, one health

Commentary on [Wiebers & Feigin](#) on Covid Crisis

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Abstract: We have to reduce our collective exploitation and consumption of animals. That is what is bringing on pandemics and other zoonotic diseases, accelerating climate change, destroying biodiversity, and causing untold amounts of animal suffering.

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1. The Zoonotic Threat. Wiebers & Feigin's (2020a,b) target article considers the genesis of zoonotic diseases such as the current global COVID-19 pandemic as they relate to our treatment and consumption of other species. From a neuropsychiatric perspective it examines how we respond to such crises, their emotional and socio-economic consequences and what changes in human behavior are needed to prevent such catastrophic, anthropogenic health crises more effectively.

Our fear-driven attitude toward viruses and bacteria is based on our failure to understand how these and other micro-organisms function and help sustain this living world. Parts of them are in our DNA and vital cellular content; and without them in our guts we would die in a few days. They can also play an environmentally beneficial role in regulating population density, optimizing ecological biodiversity and reducing dysbiosis.

The current pandemic and others that are likely to become pandemics in the future call for ever more vaccines and medications. These are not risk-free; so long as preventive medicine remains human-centered and fails to adopt a much broader and more integrative perspective that also encompasses the risks from wildlife poaching and trafficking, farming, habitat encroachment, our ever-increasing human numbers, and the consumption of animals, wild and domesticated.

2. Integrating Public Health, Veterinary and Environmental Expertise. According to a report by the UN Environment Program and the International Livestock Research Institute (Randolph et al. 2020) the [rise in zoonotic diseases](#) is being driven by environmental degradation. Among key factors the report cites rising demand for animal protein, intensive farming practices, the exploitation of wildlife, and climate change. Randolph et al. recommend adopting a [One Health](#) approach to unite public health, veterinary and environmental experts in responding to and preventing zoonotic disease outbreaks.

The proposed integrative perspective is not new; it perhaps even enjoyed stronger endorsement and support in earlier decades, before the advent of narrow clinical specialization in human and veterinary medicine. Steps toward putting it into action internationally are well articulated by the [One Health Initiative](#). The COVID-19 crisis, with more pandemics predicted, puts the applicability of the concept and its activation in bold relief.

Vaccination limitations are already a documented problem with the existing influenza virus. With the SARS CoV-2 virus able to mutate into new strains or variants, causing a different set of health problems depending on age, pre-existing health conditions, sex and race, it may be of little avail to encourage the public to invest its hopes in the ongoing efforts worldwide to develop protective, animal-tested vaccinations for prevention or drugs for the treatment of infected patients. Vaccine formulations -- not without intrinsic vaccinosis risks of their own (Schoenfield & Aron-Maor (2000) -- may well fail to provide adequate protection. Some may even cause increased susceptibility to other viral infections.

Organized veterinary medicine -- in the farm- and food-animal sector in particular -- has regrettably accorded the interests of human profit and productivity priority over animal health and well-being. In poor countries and communities veterinary medicine also fails to adequately serve the animal health-needs of small producers. Corruption, falsifying vaccination records and inadequate surveillance and prevention of zoonotic diseases have been well documented (Krantz & Fox 2016).

3. Wildlife Trafficking. Millions of mammals, amphibians, birds, insects and reptiles are imported legally into the US every year, potentially bringing with them "a kaleidoscope of pathogens," writes former Fish and Wildlife Service inspector Jonathan Kolby (2020): "With few exceptions, the US has no laws specifically requiring disease surveillance for wildlife entering the country, and the vast majority of wild animal imports are therefore not tested."

All countries need to be severely sanctioned economically for engaging in wildlife trafficking and for having open markets selling wild-caught animals. There must be a redoubling of wild habitat protection from human encroachment with population control through ready access to voluntary family planning. Smaller families and communities need fewer livestock to sustain their needs.

The philosopher David Benatar (2020) has observed that "[i]t is curious, therefore, that changing the way humans treat animals—most basically, ceasing to eat them or, at the very least, radically limiting the quantity of them that are eaten—is largely off the radar as a significant preventive measure."

4. The Anthropogenic Threat. Settele et al. (2020) put the responsibility for COVID-19 squarely on our shoulders. "There is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us. As with the climate and biodiversity crises, recent pandemics are a direct consequence of human activity – particularly our global financial and economic systems, based on a limited paradigm that prizes economic growth at any cost. We have a small window of opportunity, in overcoming the challenges of the current crisis, to avoid sowing the seeds of future ones."

5. An Integrative Response. The current global health crisis is catalyzing international collaboration in prevention and treatment. We may yet see the emergence of a "United

Environmental Nations” that unshackles public health from politics, nationalism, and isolationism, accords priority to health and security of the people rather than to economy, and links public health with environmental and animal health. Above all, humans should keep out of wildlife habitat, for it is from there that diseases to which we may have no immunity emerge. Consumers in industrial countries should support producers of organically certified foods to sustain a healthful plant-based diet with minimal or zero consumption of meat, eggs, dairy or sea food.

Consumers and governments need to understand that the enormous and unchecked scale of factory farm animal production systems today is making it impossible to prevent global pandemics or regional outbreaks of animal-food-borne epidemics and disease. The primary source of various strains of influenza virus and of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria is the billions of chickens and pigs produced industrially world-wide every year (Ali 2019)

If we continue to consume animals as a basic food-source, market ever more vaccines and bear ever more children, rich and poor alike will be subject to the indiscriminate justice of Darwinian natural law until we learn to abide in greater harmony with other species as well as one another. With deteriorating natural controls on health-sustaining biodiversity, it will be plagues and pestilences of biblical proportions that the surviving generations inherit as the legacy of our collective failure in planetary stewardship (Treves et al. 2019; Treves 2020). The best legacy of all the suffering, death, grieving and economic impact of this latest COVID-19 pandemic would be if it changed how we choose to live.

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