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When bubonic plague came to America

Two masters biology students in my department needed to research prairie dogs some years ago — they had to receive expensive vaccination shots against bubonic plague. The range on prairie dogs is the Western U.S., west of a line cutting north and south through Hutchinson. But bubonic plague was a dreaded disease of the Middle Ages in Europe, once killing up to 60 percent of the population in the 1300s. How did this plague come to North America?



John Schrock
Educator

Yersinia pestis exists in wild rodents. We know it has resided there the longest because as a zoonosis, a disease that circulates in wild animals, the host animals are nearly immune to it. Fleas carry it from one host rodent to another. As humans traveled by ship, so did rats. Fleas infected the rats that eventually got sick and die. Fleas then left the dying rats and bit people. That is how it would spread into India, the Middle East and into Europe. North America was protected because sailing ships were slow.

But steamboats were faster. And a plague that swept through southern China in the 1890s was spread to Hawaii. Some ships carried casualties of plague, but they died on board. But when infected rats arrived and died in San Francisco in 1900, the fleas jumped to people. Plague

had arrived in America.

Bubonic plague is caused when bacteria are filtered out and infect the lymph glands under the arms and groin, producing large “buboes.” In the blood, it is septicemic plague. Both are transferred by fleas. Both were mostly fatal. But when the bacteria infect the lungs, coughing spreads plague person-to-person.

American medical workers recognized the cases of plague in March of 1900. But California Governor Henry Gage denied this plague existed. He was more concerned with California’s business image and any loss of revenue a quarantine might cause. Federal authorities came in and confirmed the infections. Yet negotiations with Surgeon General Wyman and President McKinley allowed the suppression of this report by disease experts. But newspapers spread the truth and Gage lost the 1902 election. The new governor took action and stopped the epidemic by 1904 after 121 cases with 119 deaths.

But the 1906 earthquake and massive fire of San Francisco resulted in a surge in rats and a second outbreak of plague city-wide. By 1908, there were 160 more human cases and 78 deaths. Rat eradication continued until 1911 when cases subsided. But by then, fleas had also infected wild rodents (sylvatic plague). That is how plague came to be spread across the Western United States and why the two biology masters students needed to get vaccinations to work with prairie dogs.

Prairie dogs, being a new host, may suffer over 90 percent mortality from plague outbreaks. The CDC estimates from one to

17 humans, mostly hikers, get plague each year from contact with infected prairie dogs. If caught early, it is well-treated with antibiotics. But plague also contributes to the black-footed ferret, a predator of prairie dogs, being endangered.

One lesson California Governor Gage did not learn is that it is foolhardy to contradict science. If you deny a disease’s seriousness, nature will prove you wrong.

However, we should be careful not to extrapolate our plague history with the current outbreak of COVID-19. China is not the United States in population nor in culture. Their huge population is living in far closer quarters. Wherever you see one person in the U.S., envision five in China. When the winter flu season arrived, the symptoms of influenza were identical to the initial symptoms of COVID-19. And in their close quarters, crying “wolf” — just like crying “fire!” in a crowded theater, is dangerous and can result in panic and disruption of its own.

It is outstanding that the young Chinese medical doctor detected this new viral infection in the midst of a normal flu season. The suppression of his alarm was very brief and wrong. But from what we know now of this coronavirus, it would not have prevented the eventual spread. Having suffered through the similar 2003 SARS event, Chinese officials are much more aware of the dangers of denying science. Indeed, if you want to hear this type of science denial, you only need to turn on certain radio stations in the United States today. You can still hear the echoes of a modern Governor Gage.

The spread of tracking technology

It’s creepy, really, the latest development in “taking roll” on college campuses.

In small classes, where professors get to know their students, many have always taken roll, just as high-school teachers do.

Attendance may or may not have been part of a student’s grade, but knowing who came to class — and who didn’t — helps a teacher know what was going on.

That didn’t work in large lecture classes, where one professor might teach to 100, 200, even 500 or more students at a time. There was no way to track attendance. The assumption was if you cared about your grade, you’d come to class. An occasional pop quiz might help reinforce attendance.

Performance was measured by a student’s test scores and by his or her work in “labs” associated with the lecture. Because these huge classes are efficient, they are common on colleges, especially for entry-level courses that a lot of students will take.

Upper-level classes are smaller, tougher and it’s not a good thing to miss them. I remember one large lecture, beginning sociology, I think, that bored me so. After sleeping through several classes — it started at 8:30 in the morning — I stopped going. It was easy enough to get A’s and B’s if you just read the book and went to

the lab.

Ah, but now technology offers colleges a chance to know who is at every lecture. Sensors connect to an app on students’ smart phones, taking roll as they enter and leave the room. Administrators, whose jobs may depend on such things as the school’s pass/fail and graduation rates, seem to like this.

That might almost be OK if they confined the system to taking roll at large lectures. They don’t. The computers will do more, sensors can be almost anywhere and the temptation to know where students are during class hours and even later seems too strong to resist.

Syracuse is one of the larger schools using this technology. It first appeared with athletic departments, which wanted a way to keep student-athletes on the straight and narrow. The head of one company is a former basketball coach, The Washington Post reports.

Sensors are being placed across campuses, wherever students might congregate or pass. Presumably, that might allow officials to know who is going to class and who might spend the day, say, hanging out at the student union or some other place.

Perhaps this will produce information on which students need extra help. Perhaps they’re just spreading the sensors around because they can. Oppression seems almost inevitably to follow for the nonconformist.

And the wider the net gets, the more creepy the whole story is.

How long, you have to wonder, before this spreads to big companies that want to know where their employees spend their time, especially those with jobs that require them to go out and do things outside the office, like utility workers or city inspectors.

And if the network can track workers, can’t it be adjusted to keep tabs on the rest of us?

The idea of a corporation keeping track of workers, vehicles and other assets perhaps can be justified. No one has a right to use a company vehicle or a company computer without accounting for it.

College students? Whatever happened to the idea of personal responsibility? Shouldn’t we expect them to be adults and manage their own time?

If someone is struggling, the dean might offer help. But as with many things in life, students have to learn to do what’s expected of them. That, after all, is one of the things they’re supposed to learn in college, besides physics, biology or literature.

The real threat may be the spread of tracking technology, billed as “voluntary,” to the wider society. Wouldn’t police, already busy with their license-plate readers and surveillance video, just love to have sensors everywhere, tracking everyone, just in case someone commits a crime?

Or government officials, suspicious of opposition and of those who don’t like to obey?

You can answer that one for yourselves.

Contact Your Representatives

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COVID-19 under the Dome

Everything got different last week under the Dome.

After legislators spent weeks reading and listening to news about the coronavirus, or COVID-19 as it’s called by health experts, they quietly and with whispers learned that a member of the Legislature who had been sneezing was tested for the sometimes-fatal disease. The lawmaker tested negative over the weekend — doesn’t have it.

The news doesn’t get much better than that in the culture that lives under the Dome and chats elbow-to-elbow at the third-floor Rail, and crowds into elevators and, well, generally lives in a building only slightly less crowded than a prison yard.

No COVID-19 here, that they know of ... for now...

So, what changes?

Look for legislators to want to quickly pass at least a preliminary budget bill for the rest of this fiscal year and next year that starts July 1 for state finance purposes. Then, if the Legislature should have to adjourn or take weeks off while the coronavirus hopefully wanes, there’s enough money to run the state and care for and test Kansans due to this health issue. That budget could, of course, be beefed up at the veto session which starts in late April for a final product.

But ... that first budget which is very important becomes a vehicle for spending that lawmakers want for other reasons. If they get their amendments, they’ll vote for the bill, if enough don’t, well, their bargaining power increases dramatically. Everyone knows how that works, don’t we ... ?

The budget is, of course, No. 1. But what about, say, sports gambling, or a new highway plan, or job protection and equal rights for LGBTQ Kansans? Everything becomes a bargaining lever.

Fear that COVID-19 could shut down the Legislature, starving state government and the services the budget provides to Kansans, probably became more real last week.

The House last week passed a resolution recognizing the governor’s declaration of an emergency in the state. The Senate hasn’t considered it yet, but it would grant the governor unprecedented authority to act against the disease — and authority to move money within the budget as necessary for that protection of Kansans. That’s a lot of power for a Republican-heavy Legislature to hand to a Democrat governor.

The effect of COVID-19 on the economy of the state is also largely unknown. Will more people lose their jobs, will they need state-financed health care? Would expanding Medicaid, which is 90 percent federal/10 percent state-financed, provide more health care to ill Kansans and therefore make Kansas safer for all of us?

Lawmakers get their best look at the fiscal effect of the disease on April 20, when the state’s Consensus Revenue Estimate of just how much tax money the state is going to receive this year and next is released.

Until lawmakers get the best estimate available of the state’s tax receipts should lawmakers cut taxes? An election year is the politically best time to cut taxes because, well, who doesn’t want their taxes cut? But if the pandemic disease cuts state revenues, can the state afford politically attractive tax cuts? And for whom?

Just what lawmakers do in the next week or so may tell us a lot. They need to be confident that the state will operate and keep us safe from disease before they adjourn the session.

But remember, this is an election year and they’ll have to guess (or maybe poll) to find what concerns voters most.

Oh, and legislators also can’t accept most campaign contributions until sine die adjournment of the Legislature, which closes the session for the year. And yes, some are thinking about that, too ...

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Martin Hawver
Columnist