

# Letter from Toronto: An Infectious Diseases Specialist Reflects on COVID-19

March 10, 2020 by [Letter to Editor](#)

I'm a doctor and an Infectious Diseases Specialist. I've been at this for more than 20 years seeing sick patients on a daily basis. I have worked in inner city hospitals and in the poorest slums of Africa. HIV-AIDS, Hepatitis, TB, SARS, Measles, Shingles, Whooping cough, Diphtheria...there is little I haven't been exposed to in my profession. And with notable exception of SARS, very little has left me feeling vulnerable, overwhelmed or downright scared.

I am not scared of Covid-19. I am concerned about the implications of a novel infectious agent that has spread the world over and continues to find new footholds in different soil. I am rightly concerned for the welfare of those who are elderly, in frail health or disenfranchised who stand to suffer mostly, and disproportionately, at the hands of this new scourge. But I am not scared of Covid-19.

What I am scared about is the loss of reason and wave of fear that has induced the masses of society into a spellbinding spiral of panic, stockpiling obscene quantities of anything that could fill a bomb shelter adequately in a post-apocalyptic world. I am scared of the N95 masks that are stolen from hospitals and urgent care clinics where they are actually needed for front line healthcare providers and instead are being donned in airports, malls, and coffee lounges, perpetuating even more fear and suspicion of others. I am scared that our hospitals will be overwhelmed with anyone who thinks they " probably don't have it but may as well get checked out no matter what because you just never know..." and those with heart failure, emphysema, pneumonia and strokes will pay the price for overfilled ER waiting rooms with only so many doctors and nurses to assess.

I am scared that travel restrictions will become so far reaching that weddings will be canceled, graduations missed and family reunions will not materialize. And well, even that big party called the Olympic Games...that could be kiboshed too. Can you even imagine?

I'm scared those same epidemic fears will limit trade, harm partnerships in multiple sectors, business and otherwise and ultimately culminate in a global recession.

But mostly, I'm scared about what message we are telling our kids when faced with a threat. Instead of reason, rationality, open-mindedness and altruism, we are telling them to panic, be fearful, suspicious, reactionary and self-interested.

Covid-19 is nowhere near over. It will be coming to a city, a hospital, a friend, even a family member near you at some point. Expect it. Stop waiting to be surprised further. The fact is the virus itself will not likely do much harm when it arrives. But our own behaviors and "fight for yourself above all else" attitude could prove disastrous.

I implore you all. Temper fear with reason, panic with patience and uncertainty with education. We have an opportunity to learn a great deal about health hygiene and limiting the spread of innumerable transmissible diseases in our society. Let's meet this challenge together in the best spirit of compassion for others, patience, and above all, an unflinching effort to seek truth, facts and knowledge as opposed to conjecture, speculation and catastrophizing.

Facts not fear. Clean hands. Open hearts.

Our children will thank us for it.

Dr. Abdhu Sharkawy