

One year later



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By Nate Smelle

Monday, Jan. 25 marked exactly one year since the first case of COVID-19 appeared in Canada. Reflecting on the grand scale of change that has taken place on all levels over this period of time is a staggering experience. Nevertheless, for the sake of the future, this exercise of the mind is an essential step each of us must take if we intend to be a part of the solution to the collection of crises piling on top of us.

In light of the surging number of confirmed cases, and a quickly rising death toll that reached record proportions earlier this month, we now find ourselves living under a provincially mandated stay-at-home order. Fortunately for us, with more time on our hands as we ride out this storm, we have the opportunity to look back on the road we have traveled to assess our best path forward.

As we now know, the public health measures - lockdowns, mask wearing, handwashing, and physical distancing - in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 that have necessarily inconvenienced us during the past year are effective in slowing the rate of infection when we follow them. Evidence of this is reflected in the shrinking daily case count in Ontario since the province imposed a state of emergency and stay-at-home order on Jan. 12.

This lesson could have, and in fact should have been learned during the first wave of the pandemic. Sadly, this was not the case, and thousands of people died who might otherwise still be alive. Although the majority of experts in the health-care community called for stricter measures imposed last spring, almost as soon as the numbers started decreasing a loudening call for reopening non-essential businesses, and a return to our previous perception of "normal" won out. As predicted by the experts, soon after the reopening was approved the numbers started climbing, and again we found ourselves trying to keep our heads above the crest of a second wave.

Despite a damning report by the Canadian Armed Forces which revealed the deplorable state of Ontario's long-term care facilities; and the fact that during the first wave of the pandemic, more than 80 per cent of COVID-19 deaths in Canada happened in long-term care, still we allow our elders to live in danger and fear.

While observing this tragedy in our long-term care system as it unfolds, we have also learned that the situation for seniors living in private long-term care homes is far worse than it is for those living in publicly-owned facilities. Understanding that the goal of any private company is always to generate as much profit as possible, this knowledge shouldn't come as a surprise. Still, as with every

valuable piece of information it raises more questions than answers.

The main question that comes to mind for me is whether it is ethical to allow private corporations to profit at the expense of our elders' health. Upon contemplating this question, I also cannot help but question whether there is room for the private sector to make money off of the misfortune, and/or poor health of people. In my opinion, to answer yes to this question while keeping your moral compass intact, every Canadian must have access to the absolute best health-care available no matter how much money they have in their bank account.

Realistically, none of these lessons are new. Until now we have accepted that our economic system ascribes more value to the profits of the few than the health and well-being of the many. But, just because we accepted this social inequity in the past does not mean we need to continue to do so from now on.

Certainly the pandemic still has much more to teach us. Heading forward with these open eyes, the most valuable take away from this global health crisis lingering in my mind was best articulated several decades ago by writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley. Illuminating this teaching, he wrote "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach."