

The other dangerous epidemics



By JIM POLING, Special To Bancroft This Week

Look deep inside the pandemic and you'll see other sicknesses. Not simply sicknesses, but full-blown epidemics. An epidemic of selfishness, plus an epidemic of misinformation. Both are making it more difficult to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic that has infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands. Despite the rising tolls, people are having a hard time accepting ? or are refusing to accept ? restrictions and procedures that take away some of their pleasurable pastimes and cause inconveniences. There's much whining about what we can't do. Can't have parties. Can't go to the bars to have fun with friends. Can't have those fabulous beach parties. Can't go to a baseball game. Can't go to the movies. If all the energy going into what we can't do was directed to what we can do, it might help us to return to some semblance of normal. Those who won't wear a face covering can't seem to understand that wearing a mask helps to protect other people and creates confidence and trust. What would you prefer: to walk into a store in which no one is wearing a face covering, or into a store where everyone has their mouth and nose covered? I'll take the latter choice, and I'll bet many others would as well. Wearing a mask provides some protection, and creates the confidence that shoppers need to spend time in stores. More people less fearful about entering a store, means more spending and help for a devastated economy. Some say wearing a mask infringes on their personal freedoms. Crises sometimes require that personal freedoms give way for the common good. Yes, wearing face coverings and physical distancing is inconvenient. The medical experts, however, say that without a vaccine and effective medications those two things are the best defences against spreading COVID-19. Too many of us are focused on the individual inconveniences. That's selfishness, when this cruel pandemic demands thinking in terms of community, not individuals. Selfishness is a harsh term and perhaps not totally fair in a time of crisis. Selfishness and self-preservation are close relatives and when a person senses danger, self-preservation can turn quickly into selfishness. Some of what appears to be selfishness actually is ignorance by people who have underestimated the seriousness of the virus, or imagine that anything they might do could never exacerbate it. These are people who have not absorbed what is happening in hospitals. If they viewed the intensive care unit patients coughing up foamy blood, or being zippered up in body bags, they might accept that not wearing a mask when appropriate or attending crowded gatherings can spread the disease. Complicating all this is an epidemic of misinformation. Antonio Guterres, the United Nations secretary-general has said the world is fighting a ?growing surge of misinformation.?? Harmful health advice and snake-oil solutions are proliferating,? he has said. ?Wild conspiracy theories are infecting the internet.?? This bad information often spreads faster than truthful, fact-based information. It causes confusion and drives the gullible and the poorly-informed to do foolish things. Like the person who put \$50 bills in a microwave to sterilize them. Or, the apartment dweller who covered the elevator buttons with plastic wrap to prevent spread of the virus. I hate to keep harping about the SARS experience of almost 20 years ago, but it gave us important advice on getting through a pandemic ? communicate clear and truthful information and keep politics out of conversations and decisions. Following that advice builds public trust, which eases fears and helps people accept individual restrictions and inconveniences. Politics introduced into a pandemic is as dangerous as the virus itself. That is obvious in the United States, now collapsing under the wild advance of COVID-19. The Ontario commission investigating SARS did not find evidence of

political interference back then, but noted that many people suspected there was. The mere perception of political interference, whether true or not, will sap public confidence and diminish public cooperation, the Commission said in its reports. The tools for fighting COVID-19 are clear as a cloudless sky: Wear a mask, follow physical distancing, don't listen to political nonsense, ignore social media nonsense and other sources of misinformation. Restrictions and inconveniences? In the lingo of the younger folks: just suck it up.