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Misguided health policy foments confusion, risk and disunity | Opinion

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By JOEL A. MINTZ
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FEEDBACK

With the coronavirus still claiming lives and livelihoods in unprecedented numbers, many Americans long for a national approach to the COVID-19 crisis that is consistent, compassionate and based on the best available science and data. Sadly, the Trump administration's policies have been none of the above.

Unfortunately, that's been the through line for the administration's approach to health issues from the very beginning. The president has spent years trying to abolish the Affordable Care Act (ACA) — "Obamacare" — without providing so much as an outline of how he would replace that landmark law. Moreover, his administration is pursuing a lawsuit now before the Supreme Court that seeks to end the ACA altogether. If that suit succeeds, many millions of everyday Americans will lose the health insurance coverage they desperately need in a time of pandemic, and insurance companies will be empowered to deny coverage for pre-existing conditions.

Beyond this, the Trump administration has implemented dangerously unhealthy rollbacks in the protection of air quality. These rollbacks disregard legitimate scientific research while reversing the steady progress the nation has made to keep our air clean. First, Trump's Environmental Protection Agency undid legal standards that would have resulted in cleaner, more fuel-efficient cars. Next, in the face of solid scientific evidence, the agency declined to strengthen Clean Air Act health-based standards for small airborne particles — particles that appear to damage the sensitive lungs of COVID-19 patients. The EPA has undermined rules limiting emissions of mercury — a potent neurotoxin — from coal and oil-fired power plants. It has also manipulated cost-benefit standards in a way that invites air (and other) pollution while proposing to censor sound science by excluding long accepted, well-regarded scientific studies.

The president also weakened preparedness for health crises like the current pandemic. He eliminated a unit of experts within the National Security Council tasked with planning and implementing a rapid, effective national response to global epidemics. He also cut the budget of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one of the world's leading public health organizations.

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Then there's his handling of the pandemic. Notwithstanding multiple urgent warnings from knowledgeable professionals and advisers within the federal government, Trump initially refused to respond to the incipient disease. Throughout February and early March, the president made public statements intended to reassure the public that the novel coronavirus posed no serious threat. He said the infection was "very well controlled," that there were only 15 cases of the virus in the United States and that the illness would very soon "miraculously" disappear. Wall Street wasn't fooled, and the virus refused to be gaslighted. Worse, his baseless, cavalier remarks lulled many Americans into a false sense of security, just when we should have been looking to lock things down. More importantly, the president's "happy talk" materially slowed vitally needed preparations for the pandemic, including rapid manufacture and distribution of personal protective equipment for health care providers and other essential workers, and of ventilators, masks, and tests to treat and monitor the extent and spread of the disease.

The consequences of Trump's mammoth COVID-19 blunders have been horrific. Tens of thousands of lives that could have been saved have been tragically lost. Health care systems and mortuaries in large cities have been severely strained. State and local governments have been denied badly needed federal support to implement prolonged stay-at-home/social distancing measures at an immense cost to the nation's sputtering economy and to the most economically vulnerable among us.

Notwithstanding its past missteps, it is still not too late for the administration to reverse direction and adopt humane, science-based, national health policies that meet the critical needs of ordinary Americans and guide the nation to reopen its places of business in a cautious, safe and prudent way. If it fails to do so, severely damaging consequences for our country's health and economic well-being may well take many, many years to reverse. Now more than ever, steady leadership and good judgment are needed to right our nation's listing ship.

FEEDBACK

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