What I'm Reading (Apr. 9)

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — April 9, 2020

Stories of "Chicken Little" and how we "model" our world. Should we always be the center of those models? In our moment of existential dread, new data seems to suggest we got the dinosaur extinction wrong. Finally, in six months, we will have our first national election in the time of COVID-19; how should we prepare?

COVID-19 continues to dominate my reading. While we cannot control the underlying sources and drivers of a pandemic, we can control our response. The literature, mainstream and professional, is beginning to reflect on our response. Here are three—the first looks at raising the alarm, the second at predictive modeling.

“In just two months, what sounded like hysteria to scolding experts has become conventional wisdom among even cautious epidemiologists. “We’re looking at something that’s catastrophic on a level that we have not seen for an infectious disease since 1918,” Dr. Jeffrey Shaman, a Columbia professor projecting the spread of the virus, told the New York Times on Friday. Where had I read that before?”

From NY Magazine, Why Was It So Hard to Raise the Alarm on Coronavirus? 

“During a pandemic, real data is hard to find. Chinese researchers have only published some of their findings on the spread of Covid-19 in Hubei. The ongoing catastrophe of testing for the virus in the United States means no researcher has even a reliable denominator, an overall number of infections that would be a reasonable starting point for untangling how rapidly the disease...
spreads. Since the 2009 outbreak of H1N1 influenza, researchers worldwide have increasingly relied on mathematical models, computer simulations informed by what little data they can find, and some reasoned inferences. Federal agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health have modeling teams, as do many universities.”

From Wired, The Mathematics of Predicting the Course of the Coronavirus [3]

Our sense of our place in “the natural order” has shifted with time. From Ptolemy’s view of the man at the center, to man as the master, to man as the pinnacle of evolution. Yet despite the fact that we have moved from the center to the starring role, we still maintain an us-them view of the other creatures of this planet. Does this brush with viral extinction change our thinking? Can the dinosaurs teach us another lesson?

“And on long timescales, the cheerful note is that, as Stephen Jay Gould said, not once since life evolved has it ever gone completely extinct. Life as a whole is pretty tough. But the species that are dominant before a mass extinction, effectively, are almost never the dominant ones afterward. And so that’s extremely sobering. If you’re grumpy at humanity, then you can think, well, somebody else is going to get a chance. I’m fairly hopeful that life goes on, and when life goes on, it does really interesting and creative stuff. So that’s good. But as a human, I care about us, so that’s depressing.”

It is time to reconsider what we know about the dinosaur extinction. From Quanta, A Rapid End Strikes the Dinosaur Extinction Debate [4]

“Yet the notion persists that pandemics are blips rather than an integral part of history. Lying behind this is the belief that humans are no longer part of the natural world and can create an autonomous ecosystem, separate from the rest of the biosphere. Covid-19 is telling them they cannot. It is only by using science that we can defend ourselves against this pestilence. Mass antibody tests and a vaccine will be crucial. But permanent changes in how we live will have to be made if we are to be less vulnerable in the future.”

Why this crisis is a turning point in history [5], The New Statesman

Finally, as we begin to see our way past COVID-19, we need to repair our economy and begin to plan for what was and certainly will be a very important election. The primary vote in Wisconsin is the clearest sign we may have that our fall elections need to refashioned. If you thought that the regulatory red tape of healthcare hampered our current responses, then imagine the nightmare of our election regulations in the time of COVID-19
“The general election’s timing is set by statute. Nonetheless, it would be irresponsible to require people to vote in person in the midst of a pandemic. Dramatically lower turnout would inevitably distort the results. Postponing general elections is much more problematic than postponing primaries because self-serving considerations of incumbency and partisanship play a greater role. In addition, many states lack clear electoral emergency laws, and the courts rely instead on ‘vague, subjective, ad hoc standards in rushed, politically charged proceedings.

States need to start planning immediately to facilitate voting by mail.”

From the Mercatus Center, of George Mason University, Time to Prepare for Voting by Mail [6]