What I'm Reading (May 7)

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — May 7, 2020

Do genetics play a role in COVID-19's outcomes, does the herd know better than the experts, Chinese censorship, regulations can hamper even if well intended, and finally why many of us are gardening and what might a careful listener hear from plants?

So many articles, so little time. Let us get right to it. Could there be a genetic component to COVID-19’s ill effects? There is no study as yet, and genetics might only account for a small percentage of COVID’s outcome, but consider this intriguing thought.

“The results of our modeling predict that some HLA types bind to a large number of the SARS-CoV-2 peptides while others bind to very few. That is to say, some sensors may be better tailored to SARS-CoV-2 than others. If true, the specific HLA alleles a person has would likely be a factor in how effective their immune response is to COVID-19.”

From The Conversation, Your genes could determine whether the coronavirus puts you in the hospital — and we’re starting to unravel which ones matter

As more states open up, there is a schism between what “the people” want and what the experts, based on their models recommend. While the talking heads monopolize the airwaves, people are voting with their feet. Truth be told, we voted with our feet when we voluntarily, before state regulations, restricted our activities and contacts, perhaps driven by fear and concern. John
Cochrane, an economist and senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institute writes,

“There will still be a steady flow of new cases per week, just enough to scare people. But as people slowly start to adopt common sense and ignore silly shutdowns, and as people start to adopt common sense and avoid even permitted dangerous activities, the economy can recover a good deal. All we need is good information.”

From John Cochrane’s blog, Dumb reopening might just work [3].

Whether you believe that the virus spontaneously appeared or that it somehow escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, a lot of folks are increasingly suspicious of China’s behavior, especially in communicating COVID-19’s spread. Wired has an insider’s look at Chinese communication.

“Over the previous two weeks, the government had allowed what felt like an uncharacteristic degree of openness in the flow of information out of Wuhan. But now the state was embarking on a campaign of censorship and suppression that would be remarkable even by the standards of the Chinese Communist Party.”

From Wired, Inside the Early Days of China’s Coronavirus Coverup [4]

Sometimes analogy explains things so nicely.

“Imagine a world in which the only way to get a soda is to get your doctor to write a prescription. It costs $20 per can. Your insurance company pays. The economy produces about 100,000 sodas each day.

If you lived in this world, do you think you could get people to scale up the production of soda to a level of millions of cans per day? It would be a challenge, but not because it is hard to produce and distribute soda.”

Paul Romer, a Nobel Laureate in economics, looks at the problem with regulation in the context of COVID testing. If Virus Tests Were Sodas [5]

Currently, I am reading an old book with a fascinating pertinence in today’s world, The Unsettling of America – Culture and Agriculture. It has me thinking about growing and eating food, although to be fair, I need little encouragement especially over the eating part.

“Americans have long turned to the soil in moments of upheaval to manage anxieties and imagine alternatives. My research has even led me to see gardening as a hidden landscape of desire for belonging and connection; for contact with nature; and for creative expression and improved health.”

From The Conversation, The impulse to garden in hard times has deep roots [6]

And finally, there is this.
“Even your food is psychedelic because it changes your brain chemistry and your neurobiology all the time you eat. Sugars, almonds, all sorts of neurotransmitters are flying everywhere.”

An interesting word choice, foods do influence our mood and health, so are they in some sense psychedelic? More to the point, if we loosen our definition of learning, are plants capable of learning.

From Nautil.us, Guided by Plant Voices [7].

An interview with a scientist who listens to plants. It is an interesting consideration of consciousness writ large and the inability of our words to contain our thoughts.