Every Picture Tells a Story: Seasonal Flu

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — February 1, 2021

It’s flu season in the US, but seasonal flu’s cousin, COVID-19, and its variants are getting all the press. It might be worth considering whether all those precautions we are taking concerning COVID-19 are spilling over into other health issues.

The headlines report increasing unexplained deaths, cancers, and heart disease being missed as COVID-19 continues to monopolize our healthcare systems. But what about seasonal flu? Two graphs from the New York State Department of Health capture it all.
The first shows flu or flu-like cases in outpatient settings; the baseline is a composite of data collected by the CDC. The second graph shows patients hospitalized with laboratory-confirmed influenza – perhaps a more meaningful visualization.

There is little seasonal flu

There are many reasons for the change; reporting and data collection are probably not high on the list since previous years use the same reporting methods.
Maybe COVID-19 protects against seasonal flu.

Or perhaps, wearing masks and socially distancing reduces respiratory viruses' transmission; masks don't know the difference between influenza and COVID-19.

Maybe the Asian communities have been right all along; wearing masks in flu season reduces transmission.

More importantly, perhaps this data will convince the obstinate that our behavior, which includes wearing or not wearing masks, mingling, or having one hell of a party, can impact the course of a disease.