Opinion: Seattle's homelessness crisis is about to become a public health catastrophe

Seattle faces a public health catastrophe if King County and the Seattle City Council don't deal with the squalid conditions at the city's homeless encampments.

In 1900, the top three causes of death were all infectious diseases, specifically pneumonia/influenza, tuberculosis, and diarrhea/gastroenteritis. No. 10 was diphtheria, an infectious disease that can cause a person to choke to death. Milk regularly killed people. So did water.

In 2017, the top three causes of death were heart disease, cancer and chronic lower respiratory disease, all of which are referred to as “lifestyle” diseases (though genetics often plays a large role).

This transition happened because science declared war on infectious disease and won. Microbiologists and epidemiologists figured out how dangerous microbes spread and put a stop to it. We implemented a series of public health reforms and now infectious disease plays a far less prominent role in modern society.

But infectious diseases never really “go away.”

That is why, today, our public health system is based on prevention. We use a variety of methods, including vaccination, water chlorination, sanitation, pasteurization and enforcing food safety standards. Public health also relies on individuals – every person must practice good hygiene.
If any of these components of public health are removed, infectious disease will come back.

We are already seeing this consequence in Seattle, particularly among the homeless population.

In 2017, more than twice as many homeless people died on the streets compared with 2012. This is a predictable outcome of our local governments’ strange reluctance to provide proper care for the homeless. There was even pushback against washing human feces off sidewalks because it reminded King County Councilman Larry Gossett of the hoses used against civil rights activists.

Unsurprisingly, King County officials now report cases of “trench fever,” a disease that is historically associated with the unsanitary conditions faced by soldiers fighting in World War I. It is caused by a bacterium called bartonella that is transmitted by body lice.

Additionally, King County reports a near doubling of cases of shigella, which causes bloody diarrhea. Health department officials also noted an increase in streptococcus, an outbreak of which killed four people in Anchorage in 2016.

We should expect more such outbreaks. No matter how we measure it, Seattle has one of the worst homelessness problems in the country and the crisis is growing.

Despite this, Seattle has been relatively lucky. San Diego, which also has a large homeless population, recently experienced an outbreak of hepatitis A that infected 600 people, 20 of whom died. A grand jury found that city and county officials were unprepared, uncooperative and uncoordinated. Sound familiar?

The fact that Seattle has a large contingent of anti-vaccine activists doesn’t help. KUOW reported in 2015 that Seattle kindergarteners had a lower polio vaccination rate than several countries in Africa and the Middle East. If we won’t provide proper health care to our children, no wonder we aren’t willing to do so for the homeless.

This madness must stop. Outbreaks of infectious disease should be a wake-up call to the Seattle City Council, who must change its policy on homelessness now.

We cannot wait for more affordable housing to be built. Instead of allowing the homeless to live in squalor, we must place them - involuntarily, if need be - into health care facilities that provide the medical and psychiatric care many desperately need. This is what the city should be spending taxpayer money on, not $12-million-per-mile bicycle lanes.

If our councilmembers refuse to prevent people from defecating in the streets, then they must dedicate the resources necessary to cleaning them. Feces, needles and litter cannot be tolerated. That’s how infectious disease spreads.

Unfortunately, for bizarre ideological reasons, the council seems hellbent on doing anything but the right thing. It is adamantly opposed to enforcing existing laws and requiring that basic public health standards are met. If and when a public health catastrophe occurs, the City Council and Mayor Jenny Durkan will have blood on their hands.
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