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## Strange CDC Decisions on Vaccine and Mask Mandates

In the early 1970s your blogger (YB) taught junior high school (ages 11 through 14) in a large Midwestern City. He had about 180 students per semester (6 classes of about 30 students each). He got coughs and colds all the time. He had had mumps, measles (he thinks) and chicken pox as a child, so he did not catch them.

The reason for the coughs and colds, of course, was exposure to children with these conditions. Some were asymptomatic. Others were not. While it was unlikely that parents knowingly sent obviously sick children to school, school did act as a form of day care, so at the margin, a child with sniffles, sneezes, or coughs might be sent to school so his or her parent could go to work. YB would get sick.

Here is the context of the exercise. This past week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determined that people who had had the requisite number of vaccinations for COVID-19 (2 for Pfizer or Moderna, 1 for Johnson and Johnson) could “unmask” when they were with people who had also had the requisite number of vaccinations. “Free at last!” How are we to determine whether the maskless people had had vaccinations? We are to assume that if they are maskless, then they are vaccinated.

This is a high bar. As YB often reminds readers, this is a health economics blog, and the issue here is pollution. Some pollutants, such as diesel smoke, are obvious. Others such as carbon monoxide are colorless and odorless. We are told not to use charcoal grills in the home, or leave our cars running in the garage, because the carbon monoxide will kill us. Most people adhere to these standards, although one reads periodically of carbon monoxide-related deaths.

The source of the pollution is important. Scholars who study pollution sometimes talk about *point* and *nonpoint* sources of pollution. A steel mill may be a point-source polluter. We know where it is, and we know where the pollution starts, and (generally) where it goes. Nonpoint sources of pollution can come from hundreds or thousands of places, like hundreds or thousands of people. If we do not know where it comes from, it is much harder to stop it. At a concert, one may be most in danger from an infected person who is right next to us, but if hundreds of people are together, singing, cheering, or just making noise, the resulting aerosol may impact those who are not necessarily right next to us.

We do NOT trust restaurant workers not to get tuberculosis – anyone who has worked in a restaurant is aware of the requisite TB test. Most states mandate the MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella) vaccines for children to enter schools. In normal times, we do not ask children to wear masks in schools.

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They come to school with the MMR certification and we trust it. The system is not perfect. Within the past several years there have been measles epidemics in schools that could be traced to unvaccinated children. The spread is generally limited, because most children have been “vaxed”.

Consider an indoor concert, or a religious service, or a wedding. There are likely to be tens, if not hundreds, of people who we do not know. Do we assume that those who go maskless have been “vaxed”? Do we ask each one of them? Do they tell us the truth if we ask? Who is responsible, if we don't?

But ... aren't we safe now? Isn't COVID-19 going away? Understand that close to 20 percent of the world's population lives in India and Brazil, and those two countries are in flames with COVID-19. Recall that in March 2020, President Trump would not let the Grand Princess dock, to keep our numbers low, while returning air travelers from Europe were infecting New York and New Jersey. New strains of COVID-19 are an airliner away.

It seems almost absurdly obvious that (for now) we must have *either* a vaccine *or* a mask mandate. YB favors the vaccine mandate. We require people to have licenses to drive. We require school children to be vaxed with MMR. Until smallpox was eradicated, US travelers abroad often had to get smallpox boosters to “be sure” that they were vaccinated.

All countries with working governments require passports for people to enter from without. We require people who fly to have government issued identification, and then we submit would-be fliers to X-Ray and sometimes physical examination to prevent another 9/11. For younger readers, on September 11, 2001, nineteen hi-jackers boarded four airliners with no substantive IDs, because we trusted them to do no harm.

So ... the bottom line. We need at least a mask mandate or a vaccine mandate. They are critical to our country's health in the next six to twelve months.

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