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How Much Longer Will We Need Masks?

Just about a year ago, your blogger (YB) and his partner received a package of 100 paper face masks from abroad. They figured that they would need them for a couple of months at most. Although since then they have both acquired multiple cloth face masks, they still have the original package, now dwindled through use by our housekeeper, as well as guests, to about half a dozen. Partner noted today that it would be a good idea to buy another package.

YB + partner have both passed the fourteen-day period post-second vaccination. The dread that followed everyone through 2020 has been replaced by a less dreadful, but nonetheless palpable, malaise related to the future, regarding the way that the rest of 2021 will unfold.

This is a health economics blog. With infectious diseases, individuals who ignore the external effects on others, and will tend to “under-vaccinate.” Early estimates that so-called herd immunity could be achieved with vaccination rates of about 70% seem to have given way to target rates closer to 90%.

We have two tools to get to the good rate. The *first tool* involves economic incentives in getting more people vaccinated. This involves promoting demand, and subsidizing supply (lowering the price). We have, figuratively speaking, picked a lot of the “low-hanging” fruit for vaccination. Those who wanted vaccinations, frustrated early in this 2021 year, are now able to get appointments for the vaccinations that they seek. This group will probably be fully vaccinated by July or August.

Does that mean that Americans will be able to throw the doors of our schools, stadiums, orchestra halls, restaurants, and houses of worship wide open to people without masks? It appears not, because there is still considerable vaccination resistance. A crowded concert, church service, or martini bar, filled with people who are close together, will provide a recipe for COVID-19 relapse unless enough people are immune. It will not take many outbreaks of COVID-19 from these gatherings to lead to new school shut-downs, and attendance rules. It is hard to imagine that traditional crowded classrooms, or college dormitories will be available (or sane) by the traditional Labor Day opening in 2021.

YB has advocated over the past year, first for testing mandates, and now for vaccine mandates, enforced through stadium-type entrances, with bar-coded ID cards. Some Universities have already announced such mandates. YB + partner look forward to their beloved Detroit Symphony Orchestra concerts, but they will not attend without assurance that the people with whom they are sandwiched into Orchestra Hall are safe. That suggests that the *second tool* remains mandates and face masks.

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