

Let's stick to the facts on the coronavirus and worry more about the flu | Opinion

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Katherine Foss, Guest columnist Published 7:00 a.m. ET Feb. 5, 2020

Fake news is running rampant as the coronavirus spreads—and the World Health Organization is pushing back on the misinformation. Buzz60

In the midst of media's heavy coronavirus coverage, Dr. Theodore Woodward's proverb for medical students that "when you hear hoofbeats, look for horses not zebras," reminds us that the prevalent cause is the most likely.

Cases of this strain emerged in Wuhan, China, reaching more than 20,000 cases. It makes sense then to implement quarantine, travel screening and restrictions in areas at risk. What doesn't is the overreaction perpetuated by social media and pseudo-scientific sites that pass off fiction as fact.

At the same time, minimal attention has been given to the more prevalent illnesses plaguing us across the United States.



Hand sanitizer gels have sold out in a drug store in London. Pharmacies and drug stores say they have seen a spike in sales of hand sanitizer amid concern about the outbreak of Coronavirus. (Photo: JUSTIN TALLIS, AFP via Getty Images)

We have become complacent with established diseases. Or perhaps we've forgotten their lethal potential. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 180,000 people in the U.S. have been hospitalized with strains of influenza just this flu season, with 68 pediatric deaths as of Jan. 25. In Tennessee this week, more than 12 Tennessee school districts closed- not for an emerging contagion, but due to influenza, stomach flu and strep throat. Yet, we've heard very little about these outbreaks, thus fueling perceptions of coronavirus as the threat of the moment.

Misinformation has distorted and impaired flu vaccination efforts. Even though you might still get sick with the flu vaccine, your chances of hospitalization and death are greatly reduced. Furthermore, the varied effectiveness of the seasonal shot still offers more protection than inhaling bergamot oil. This lapse in the collective memory of infectious disease feeds anti-vaccination rhetoric that undermines public health efforts to curb transmission.

Although coronavirus should certainly be on our public health radar, we need to keep our concern in check. Avoid fear-mongering sites and social media groups that overhype risk. Steer clear of online remedies untested by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

You don't need to don a surgical mask to the office in hopes of battling an invisible, "imported" enemy. And if you do start to feel ill, call your health professional and stay home, but don't panic.

It's more likely the familiar horse.

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