Reflections on the Pandemic

Just as it looked like we had recovered from the EVALI epidemic, along comes the novel Coronavirus, which is probably the biggest social disrupter in my lifetime since World War II, and probably the most domestically threatening since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. We have all been and will continue to be bombarded with information about this rapidly evolving pandemic, so I will refrain from repeating what we already know and what constitute the remaining uncertainties. But there are some important lessons ingrained in this pandemic.

First, it reminds us that?as with tobacco use?public health is a global condition that respects no boundaries. Just as we learned from the graphic cigarette package warnings or plain packaging in Australia, Canada and Brazil, how other nations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic will be useful for us here as we try to contain the pandemic.

Second, it reminds us of the centrality of public health to a nation?s wellbeing. We are so fortunate to have competent and dedicated health professionals at the CDC, whether in tobacco control, like Tim McAfee or Corinne Graffunder of the Office on Smoking and Health, or in all the other public health domains. We rely on these public servants to collect, analyze and distribute the latest data?whether on smoking, EVALI, or COVID-19, as well as to design and execute policies and research that will improve public health. As a long-ago Epidemic Intelligence Office at the CDC (then called the Center for Communicable Diseases), I know how diligently CDC staff work at trying to promote and preserve the health of the public. As they do their work, it is vital that the agency receives adequate funding, that it be buffered from partisan politics, and that its policies and recommendations be based on sound knowledge, including admitting gaps in our knowledge. The same comments apply to the other federal agencies, including the NIH, FDA, and SAMHSA, as well as to state and local health agencies. In our work at the Smoking Cessation Leadership Center we have been privileged to work closely with staff from all these sectors, and are constantly impressed with their motivation, dedication, and competence as they do their crucial but often overlooked work. They are genuine patriots, much deserving of our support and gratitude. Coping with this new pandemic will stress them greatly, but I am confident that?just as with the HIV/AIDS epidemic?they will be there for us.

Finally, there seems to be a link between smoking and the heightened risk of symptoms from the COVID-19 virus. From what we know about the course of the disease in high impact countries, especially China, many individuals whose conditions worsened from the pulmonary complications of the virus, including death, had lungs already weakened from smoking [1]. This is yet another reminder of the devastating consequences of smoking. Although it is too late to prevent such damage among the current elderly, it is almost a certainty that this is not the last we have heard of such epidemics. This is but the most recent of the many reasons that we need to help people stop smoking.
On behalf of the staff at the Smoking Cessation Leadership Center, I want to express our wishes that you stay healthy, are able to continue your good work, and can tolerate all the disruptions and anxieties that this pandemic has visited upon us.