When Germs Travel
Contagious Themes Across Time in America

Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues
Meeting on Ebola Virus Disease
February 5, 2014

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Major *Leit Motivs* of Epidemics and Pandemics

Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Epidemics are almost always framed and shaped, sometimes advanced, and sometimes hindered by how a given society understands a particular microbe to travel and infect others.

"Doktor Schnabel von Rom" ("Doctor Beak from Rome"). Engraving, Rome, 1656.
The economic losses typically associated with epidemics can have a strong influence on public response.
A dangerous theme of epidemics past, in terms of worsening spread, is their concealment, delays in reporting them, or their severity being ignored or underestimated by the world at large.
The movement of people and other living beings and the speed of travel are essential factors in the spread of infectious disease.
Quotation of the Day

OCT. 9, 2014

“Germs have always traveled. The problem now is they can travel with the speed of a jet plane.”

HOWARD MARKEL, a professor of the history of medicine at the University of Michigan, on the spread of Ebola beyond West Africa.

A version of this quote appears in print on October 9, 2014, on page A2 of the New York edition with the headline: Quotation of the Day.
Widespread media coverage of epidemics is hardly new and an essential aspect of any epidemic.
Our fascination with the suddenly appearing microbe that kills relatively few in spectacular fashion often trumps our response to infectious scourges that patiently kill millions every year.
The sudden appearance of an epidemic typically inspires rapid attention, panic and action. Once the crisis subsides, public attention wanes although the threat of contagion continues, especially among the world’s poor. Compare our response to severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, with the more familiar germs that plague us daily. Compare it to the dangers of smoking or getting in a car and heading out on the road. Every life is precious, but when you look at the numbers, SARS just isn’t as formidable a threat as we’ve made it out to be. Its death rate is far lower than that for AIDS or malaria; coronaviruses, like the one believed to cause SARS, tend to be most active in the winter and early spring.

In addition to taking the steps necessary to keep SARS at bay—watching out for new cases and isolating people who are contagious to others—we would do well to channel our energies into something more lasting: a permanent, integrated and accountable global public health system for the surveillance and prevention of the microbes that are certain to emerge in the future. Right now, worldwide accounting of disease is incomplete at best, hampered in large measure by sketchy reporting from developing countries. These gaps slowed our containment of SARS and allowed rumor to spread more rapidly than reliable information. When the facts are few, it’s easy for fear to fill the vacuum.

Howard Markel, professor of pediatrics and communicable diseases at the University of Michigan, is author of the forthcoming “When Germs Travel.”

Poverty and its attendant evils often fuel the fire of an epidemic.
One of the saddest themes in the history of epidemics is the tendency to scapegoat or blame individuals or social groups for the importation of infection.

Judge, September, 1892
The Newcomer, the Marginalized, the Threat (real or perceived) of Contagion, and Laws Governing Migration, Individual Liberties, and Movement
Internecine Rivalries and Disputes Between Local, State and the Federal Government
Q: What will be the next deadly pandemic and how will it unfold?

A: “No one really knows what's going to happen. Anyone who says they do is either a fool or lying.”

---Howard Markel, M.D., Ph.D.