

What We Would Now Know, If Demagogues Didn't Rule Every Country on Earth

About six months after the rise of COVID-19, humanity still doesn't know the answers to a long list of critical questions. Questions like:

1. What is the true Infection Fatality Rate (IFR)?
2. What fraction of the population has COVID-19 now?
3. What fraction of the population has already had it?
4. How does the IFR really vary by age, gender, and prior health status?
5. How much immunity to COVID-19 do recovered patients acquire?
6. What are the odds of contracting the disease indoors versus outdoors? From asymptomatic carriers?
7. How much does infection probability fall as social distance rises from 3 feet to 20 feet?
8. What are the odds of fomite transmission?
9. How much does viral load affect infection severity?

Yet amazingly, we have a straightforward and ethically unimpeachable way to decisively answer all of these questions – and countless more. The method is: *paid voluntary human experimentation*.

Experimentation is vital because it is the core of the scientific method.

Human experimentation is vital because we want to know the effects of COVID-19 on humans.

Voluntary human experimentation is vital because we are not comic-book villains.

Paid voluntary human experimentation is vital because there is a massive supply of people willing to risk their lives for large cash payments, but relatively few heroes willing to risk their lives for free.

How would paid voluntary human experimentation work? To find the true IFR, you recruit a thousand volunteers, test them for coronavirus and coronavirus antibodies, deliberately infect half of the never-infected subjects, and then compare the death rates for the two groups. Morbid? Callous? No more morbid or callous than paying people to fight in a war,

mine coal, or cut down trees. The social value of the knowledge is immense, they knowingly accepted the risk, and they were paid for their efforts. Deaths along the way are unfortunate, but in no way blameworthy.

To find the risk of fomite infection, similarly, first measure fomite levels in, say, eleven grocery stores. Then recruit a thousand volunteers, randomly send half of them to the median store to shop for an hour, quarantine all of them for two weeks, then compare the infection rate for the two groups.

Finding the true infection rate isn't quite as clean, admittedly. But you can still randomly offer citizens a lot of money to participate in the study, until you get 90 or 95% participation. Then measure prevalence. Way better than even Iceland has done so far.

You get the idea. So why isn't paid voluntary human experimentation already a reality? You could claim that none of the preceding questions matter for policy, but that is madness itself. The value of accurately measuring disease parameters is rationally unassailable.

You could say, "Well, it's just not ethical." This, too, is madness itself. Life entails risk of death. We routinely let people voluntarily risk their lives for trivial gain, like the pleasure of climbing Mount Everest. So it is crazy to forbid people to assume risks with astronomical social value.

You could say, "Well, our government is too messed up to do the right thing." But that still doesn't explain why *no* country is going full-speed ahead with paid voluntary human experimentation. Even poor, backwards countries could have scrounged up the money for paid voluntary human experimentation, perhaps outsourcing the analysis to a richer country.

So how come no one has done as I advise? Because every country on Earth is ruled by demagogues – power-lusters who would rather watch hundreds of thousands die rather than defy popular but absurd scruples. Don't tell me, "Leaders' hands are tied." Leaders around the world have figured out how to legally rationalize a long list of absurd power grabs. But they can't figure out how to legally rationalize something that makes perfect sense?!

Back in 2015, Trump, speaking in the third person, said, "Donald J. Trump is calling for a complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on." Neither he nor any other world leader is serious about figuring out what the hell is going on with coronavirus. If they were, paid voluntary human experimentation would have started months ago on a massive scale – and we'd have the answers we need today.