

## **Nobody wants pandemic restrictions. The challenge is dispensing with them responsibly**

Globe and Mail - André Picard

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No one wants vaccine mandates, or vaccine passports. No one wants curfews, or restrictions at restaurants and theatres. No one wants indoor mask-wearing, or physical distancing. No one wants limits on crowd sizes, or travel restrictions.

No one has ever wanted these things. And everyone wants these accursed impositions to go away. We are pandemic-miserable and desperate for relief.

But most of the public, as well as politicians and policy-makers, have the good sense to recognize that a once-in-a-century pandemic requires a vigorous response and some sacrifices, both individual and collective.

Public-health measures have been necessary to mitigate the harm caused by SARS-CoV-2, a novel coronavirus. During a pandemic, the public needs guidance. Mitigation measures, however disliked and frustrating, have saved lives. A lot of lives. (And, yes, they've caused some collateral damage, too.)

Despite our efforts, there have been more than 5.7 million deaths recorded around the world (and the true number is likely three times as high).

The data include almost 35,000 deaths in Canada. That's nothing to sneeze at. Still, our COVID-19 death rate per capita is about one-third of that in the U.S. Why? Largely because most Canadians have accepted (if not embraced) public-health measures, and the benefits of vaccination in particular.

Public-health measures have saved a lot of lives, but the restrictions will be lifted, sooner rather than later. Not because a bunch of self-centred, loutish bully boys have been yanking their horns for a week – but because that has always been the plan, and the goal.

The only question is when, and how.

In Canada, the fifth wave of COVID-19 has peaked. Hospitalization numbers, which have been hovering at record highs of 10,000 across the country, are easing in many provinces. Deaths, which hit a record high of 225 daily in January, have dropped to half that number.

When metrics improve, then easing restrictions will be appropriate. But during past waves of the pandemic, provinces have made the mistake of moving too quickly and imprudently, paving the way for resurgences. There are troubling signs this will happen again. Saskatchewan, for example, has not only announced that all restrictions will soon end but has decreed that the province will all but end testing and no longer publish daily data.

This probably shouldn't have to be said out loud, but pretending there is no longer a pandemic is not the same as an end to the pandemic.

The United States is a striking case in point. The head-in-the-sand approach has resulted in a lot of “freedom,” but at a horrific cost. In the past seven weeks alone, the U.S. has recorded more than 100,000 COVID-19 deaths.

Contrast this with Denmark, the latest poster child for an ideal pandemic response. The small Nordic country has dropped almost all pandemic restrictions, including indoor mask-wearing. In announcing the move, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said COVID-19 was no longer a “critical threat” and she looked forward to an “open Denmark with hugs, parties and festivals.”

We should all share that dream. But if we want that kind of normal, we need to behave like collectively minded Danes, and not obsessively individualistic Americans. Embrace vaccination, not vitriol.

Denmark never had vaccine mandates because it never needed them: Danes trusted and followed public health guidance, and has one of the highest rates of vaccination and boosters in the world. The country also has some of the world’s best pandemic data collection, and that data guides policy decisions. There have been clear metrics for reopening (related mostly to hospital capacity) and for reimposing restrictions. In short, they earned their freedom by behaving responsibly.

Canadians seem to need more of a nudge.

Many pandemic restrictions can and should be lifted soon. But vaccine mandates and passports should remain in place because we need to encourage vaccination, and boosters in particular. That’s still the best way to mitigate COVID-19 harms.

In the coming weeks, things are going to look remarkably better on the pandemic front. Among other things, we will get some seasonal relief with the arrival of spring.

Still, it’s clear that COVID-19 is here to stay. We have to “learn to live with it.” But that well-worn and much-abused phrase is not a synonym for doing nothing.

We need to shift carefully from public health edicts to guidance and recommendations. Increasingly, personal responsibility will displace public health restrictions. But that will only work if individuals are prepared to behave responsibly.

Paradoxically, the more impatient we are, the more likely we will be mired in the pandemic’s clutches.