

Why the coronavirus is different from flu and warrants major action

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People who argue that covid-19 is no bigger a problem than flu ignore the fact that we lack natural immunity and have no vaccines in our armoury

FOR weeks now, the news has been dominated by the coronavirus. This is hardly surprising: it is an unprecedented global story with an unknown ending, featuring a new virus we don't yet fully understand. The planet's most populous nation shut down an entire province to try to contain it, and now there is an exponential uptick in cases worldwide.



It is also no wonder everyone is talking about the virus, given many people are worrying about the risks to themselves or their loved ones. No wonder, too, that inaccurate articles and even conspiracy theories are flourishing, and that warnings to be ready for self-isolation have led to panic-buying.

Inevitably perhaps – with the numbers of diagnosed cases currently still low in many countries – a backlash is under way. There is a view that the fatality rate will turn out to be tiny, that the new virus is no more noteworthy than flu and that the economic harm of containment measures doesn't justify the lives they could save. The media, meanwhile, is being accused of stoking panic in its reporting.

But as Michael Leavitt, a former US secretary of health, put it last week: “Anything said in advance of a pandemic seems alarmist. After a pandemic begins, anything one has said or done is inadequate.”

The best information now available suggests a fatality rate of around 0.7 per cent, which means the covid-19 virus has the potential to kill a large number of people worldwide. The virus differs from flu in that there is no widespread immunity to it – the only people likely to have any are those who have already had it. What's more, unlike flu, we have no vaccines to give to those who are most at risk.

“The only people likely to have any immunity to the new coronavirus are those who have already had it”

All this means that concern over the virus and considered action to delay its spread – such as meticulous hygiene and not taking your runny nose to work if you can avoid doing so – are fully justified. While much of China has seen a death rate of 0.7 per cent, the fatality rate was far higher in Wuhan, the city with the first cases, where hospitals were hit with many cases at once. Far from constituting “panic”, precautionary action to tackle the virus is only sensible.