



The honour system; why honesty and education are so important during a global pandemic

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HALIFAX -- Public health measures surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic require a degree of truthfulness to be fully effective and help maintain the spread of the virus.

While some Canadians have acted in accordance, others have not, and many are asking the question, why?

“By not disclosing, they’re putting people’s lives at risk,” said New Brunswick Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Jennifer Russell during a news update on Jan. 5.

It’s a topic Maritime officials have addressed lately, including N.B. Premier Blaine Higgs, who last week called out residents caught lying to contact tracers who are working to stop the spread of COVID-19.

“Some have lied to public health,” said Higgs during a news update on Jan. 5.

One psychologist tells CTV News that whether big or small, most people lie at least once or twice a day.

“People lie all the time,” said Simon Sherry, a psychologist in Halifax. “Some people lie about everything, even things of great importance, like where you were in a pandemic.”

Researchers at Brock University in Ontario studied more than 450 American adults in 2020. Of those, one-third of them with COVID-19 denied having symptoms, and one-quarter reported lying about using physical distancing.

“There is quite a degree of concealment and secrecy going on about our COVID behaviours,” said Alison O’Connor, a researcher at Brock University.

O’Connor believes these results come down to consequences people are trying to avoid.

“Let’s say, if you’re breaking some of the protocols and then you don’t want to be shamed from other people for doing that, you’re embarrassed about your actions,” said O’Connor. “That can encourage you to keep that information secret.”

Bioethicist Marika Warren, says all of these examples are why public health officials are encouraging to follow protocols to protect others, rather than emphasize punitive measures.

“One of the reasons we’ve had so many ethical questions come up, is because the pandemic illustrates just how interconnected we all are,” said Warren.

“So as a community, the more we establish that this is just what we do, together I think that creates a lot of positive feedback effect.”

Warren says the need for honesty goes both ways.

That point recently came into the spotlight after a number of Canadian politicians went abroad despite official directives to avoid non-emergency travel.

Aside from being truthful, experts say there is also misinformation that comes with any new health crisis.

“The greatest example of that is the HIV/AIDS epidemic,” says Jonathan Roberts, a history professor at Mount Saint Vincent University who specializes in the history of pandemics.

Roberts recently launched an entire podcast series covering pandemics from the Black Plague to Yellow Fever.

In those podcasts, Roberts speaks of topics such as how families hid sick relatives from authorities during the Black Plague – or the widespread myths about HIV.

He says it’s a pattern that we’re seeing repeat itself today.

“The problem is as soon as you enforce, there’s always going to be a group of people who think that the disease has been invented to assert control and as soon as you assert that control, they say, ‘ah ha, see. I told you so,’” explained Roberts.

Roberts says it’s a pattern from the past that can be used to learn in the present pandemic.