

There is a new campaign worldwide and it's growing. It's called Flattening the Fear and it's meant to provide an alternative way of living in the new normal. Instead of lockdowns and increased restrictions on human activity, this initiative aims to provide protocols on how people can and should live with COVID-19.

In the United States, professionals and doctors belonging to the Job Creators Network Foundation (JCNF) have banded together with ordinary citizens to spread the news – COVID-19 remains but we have to learn to live with it. A noted physician, Dr. Katarina Lindley, President of the Texas ACOFP, and an active JCNF member summed up what this citizens' movement proposes in a letter published by the Texas Public Policy Foundation:

“The messaging from leadership and the medical community should be clear: ‘Yes, we have increase in the (COVID-19) cases but we do not have an increase in mortality...We need to protect vulnerable populations, practice common sense and protect ourselves and our families by being aware of the risks while trying to live a normal life. We need to stop fearing the disease, and instead respect it—and learn to live with it. It is here to stay, but we should not allow it to take our freedom and liberties away.’”

That message got amplified, maybe even prompted, by the latest revisions on the facts and figures on the impact of the disease from no less than the US CDC, the body mandated to provide the needed guidance on how to cope with diseases such as COVID, in this wise:

- The COVID-19 infection fatality rate estimate is down to just 0.26 percent;
- For those outside of nursing homes, the infection fatality rate is estimated to be just 0.13 percent.
- One percent of counties in the country account for roughly 40 percent of all COVID-19 deaths nationally.
- Ten percent of counties account for roughly 80 percent of all deaths.
- Roughly 25 percent of the counties in the country haven't experienced a single coronavirus death.
- Nearly half of all coronavirus deaths have come in nursing homes.
- In many states, nursing homes and assisted living facilities account for far more than half of all deaths—around 75 percent in Minnesota and around 70 percent in Ohio.
- Roughly 80 percent of all COVID-19 deaths are among those over 65 years old.
- Those aged under 55 account for just eight percent of all COVID-19 deaths.
- If you are 34 years old or younger, your probability of dying from COVID-19 as of June 3rd was 0.0005 percent.
- The overwhelming majority of deaths are among those with at least one other underlying medical condition. Among patients hospitalized with COVID-19, 91.5 percent have at least one underlying health condition.
- Most ICU beds—in most cases 75 percent or more—aren't occupied by COVID patients.
- The resumption of elective—yet vital—surgeries is contributing to increased ICU utilization rates around the country.
- More children die each year from the flu than COVID-19.
- Children rarely display serious symptoms from COVID-19 or infect others. Some scientists believe children are a “brake” on transmissions.

In the U.S., the probability of being struck by lightning is higher than the chances of a school-age child (5-14) first getting and then dying of COVID-19. After European schools reopened, there was no observable increase in COVID-19 cases.

- The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control, and the National Academy of Sciences conclude that children can safely return to schools.

These facts and figures can very well represent what's happening in the Philippines and most other countries worldwide. For if truth be told, this virus will not go away anytime soon. We will really have to learn to live with it just like we have come to live with the common colds, flu and even pneumonia. In fact, there is increasing evidence that COVID-19 is not as deadly as we were once told. After six months of lockdowns complete with the health protocols and, of course, analysis of the DNA, development and, yes, experimentation with possible prophylactics and cures we now have a body of language which can guide us in crossing troubled waters, so to speak, as we transit into the new normal. More and more people are now convinced that this virus need not be looked at as more fearsome than those diseases we have come to live with in times past and even up to this day.

A closer look at the key disease statistics such as death per day should give us a measure of relief. The latest figures indicate that on a daily basis, 211 Filipinos die of pneumonia and flu; 233 of heart disease; 167 due to stroke; 178 to cancer; 33 to vehicular accident; 19 due to suicide and 20 to COVID. On the other hand, the fatality rate for COVID-19 has been consistently below the global rate while case fatality has been equally below that of the global standard. Finally, our recoveries have been on the rise which can only mean that most of those testing positive for COVID-19 eventually overcome the same.

For this reason and bolstered by evidence generated from COVID-19 cases across the country, a group of doctors and concerned citizens have petitioned President Duterte to immediately lift all lockdowns imposed to prevent the spread of the disease nationwide. Instead of various grades of quarantine imposed unevenly for medical, political or financial reasons by different levels of governing bodies nationwide, the 5,000 members of the Concerned Doctors and Citizens of the Philippines led by former health secretary Jaime Galvez-Tan urged Duterte to adopt a national protocol for the prophylaxis and early treatment of COVID-19.

"We proposed to the President to adopt a national protocol for the prophylaxis and early treatment of COVID-19 that aims to reduce hospitalization and prevent loss of lives," the CDCph said in a unity statement read by Galvez-Tan during the movement's launch last week. He noted that the implementation of a national protocol for early treatment of COVID is an effective, safe, inexpensive and science-based solution to address the pandemic in the country.

Under this proposed plan, government will focus its efforts on early treatment and home quarantine for most patients and prophylaxis for high risk individuals such as frontliners and the elderly. Another senior member, Dr. Edwin Bien, said anti-viral drug hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) could be given as prophylaxis to prevent COVID infection. He said hydroxychloroquine is safe if given in correct dosage upon consultation with doctors. Bien said that he has been using and prescribing the drug to his patients and it has been working adding that the adverse effects were due to overdose.

During the launch, other doctors presented data indicating low death rate among COVID patients from countries with access to HCQ. Separate studies have also shown full benefit with early intervention or when treatment is given during the first five days of infection. Hospitalization rate is lower for those treated early. A geriatric doctor, Homer Lim, said even without HCQ, early intervention can help reduce the number of people being hospitalized due to moderate and severe COVID infection. Lim said daily dosage of vitamins D and C can boost the immune system and thus prevent replication of virus when it enters the body noting that lower Vitamin D level has a higher chance of testing positive for COVID and developing severe or critical infection.

With this alternative protocol, the government and our people will no longer have to choose between saving lives and saving livelihood, Galvez advised.

It is time we insist that the restrictive measures such as enhanced police presence, mandated use of double shields (masks and shields) in public or enclosed spaces, use of universities and schools as quarantine facilities, imposing all kinds of restrictions on the opening of retail, tourism and other sectors, restricting public transport and a hundred and more other such measures some of which like the use of barriers on motorcycle tandem riding were eventually set aside, be revisited and, as warranted, withdrawn.

It is about time we have to remind our people that ultimately their health and that of their families, communities and ultimately, the nation's, rests heavily on their complying with the basic health protocols. And that, if we all want to be freed from any unwarranted restrictions, get back to work and live normal lives under COVID-19 after six months of lockdown, we should all stay the course and take care of ourselves foremost. It is about time we reminded ourselves that like in the past other pandemics have been conquered. It is time to live with COVID-19 in as responsible and proper a manner as possible.

Living with COVID need not be one living in fear. It can be living with the right and new lifestyle, with the proper protocols and with compassionate care for the well being of our families and other people.

Under this new normal, we should not only flatten the curve, we should flatten the fear even more.