
Covid-19: Thoughts from a worried mother

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

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We are facing a pandemic, with a virus that we don't yet know much about. I am the mother of a child with cancer, and I am worried.

I am a doctor and a mother of five young boys. We are definitely in the right age group to be coping well with the coronavirus, which of course applies to most people. Looking around me, it appears that the virus is not generally the main concern. That's not the case with me. Empty supermarket shelves are a long way down on my list of worries just now. In the week before the nurseries and schools were closed, I deliberated every day whether I should be sending my children there. The reason is that one of our boys is at a much higher risk than other people. He is not like other children. He is receiving treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, a form of cancer that affects the immune system – the very system which is supposed to protect us against the viruses and bacteria that enter our bodies. My son's tiny body has been pumped full of medication that aims to break down his immune system in order to kill the cancer cells that are sitting there.

He has three months left of a 30-month course of treatment. And now we are facing a situation which involves a virus we fear may affect close to 30 per cent of the population and that will be fatal for many, primarily in the high-risk groups. China has not reported any deaths among children under ten, but this does not put my mind at ease. I have a son whose immune system does not work properly, a boy with a body that is weary after almost 30 months of treatment. I am worried, extremely worried.

In the last week, and particularly in the last days, my thoughts have been exceedingly chaotic. I have been at a loss as to how to deal with the situation in our country and the world at large. Should my whole family self-isolate at home or should I comply with the directives issued by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the Directorate of Health? One moment I look at my son and his siblings thinking that he looks just like the others and that this is going to be okay, that we can allow ourselves to live in the same way as the healthiest people in society. He is strong, and he will be able to withstand a corona infection. The next moment I envisage a scenario where he is lying in intensive care with tubes sticking out all over, before my thoughts dart to the tabloid newspaper headline 'Child with cancer dies from Covid-19'.

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We will not be the only family where 'the virus', as my children call it, is being discussed around the dinner table. Hygiene measures implemented in nurseries and schools, followed by the closure of those nurseries and schools, mean that the children are very aware of the situation we are in. The older children ask about a vaccine against corona, and we adults have to explain how a vaccine works. They respond with their usual enthusiasm that we could make a vaccine from washing-up liquid and water, making sure to emphasise that it would have to be injected into our veins. My son who suffers from leukaemia smiles as he says that he doesn't fear the virus because children do not get sick. I smile back at him, but say nothing, for of course I do not want to frighten anyone. What I want to say is that our family will have to be extra careful because he is more likely than others to become seriously ill. And that I don't know whether he will be able to fight it. I want to talk about my anger towards all those who fail to see the seriousness of the situation, those who are so healthy that they have no worries, who, despite recent recommendations to stay together with only the closest family members, send their kids off to the football grounds with lots of other people, or head off to Sweden for a shopping trip. Those who think they have been given a well-deserved holiday. Those who fail to understand that they can pass the infection on to someone who works in the health service, which could ultimately bring the entire health service to its knees.

In the middle of all this, I am also a doctor; a resource that society needs now more than ever. I find it difficult to go to work. Most of all, I want to stay at home to protect my child against the contagion. Nevertheless, I feel I have no choice. I have to contribute to society, to help all of those who are more at risk than me in this situation. I do hope that everybody else will do the same: think about people other than themselves and their nearest family. If so, I and many others may be able to avoid self-isolating for months. Showing concern for those beyond your closest circle is also the recipe for success.

Publisert: 18 March 2020. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen. DOI: 10.4045/tidsskr.20.0220
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