

The Pandemic of COVID-19

Thursday, March 12th before break was the last time I was on campus. Thursday evening I began having flu-like symptoms again. I was recently sick with flu symptoms the week of February 23rd. I usually get the flu vaccine every year. This year I did not. Thursday evening after dinner I started having body aches, a sore throat, and runny nose. I went to bed and woke up at 4:00 am with a 101 fever. That morning I called out of work and my internship and called my doctor's office letting them know the symptoms I had, as per recommendations by public health officials. I was less concerned that I had COVID-19 and more concerned that I was just sick about a week ago, why was I sick again?

After waiting on hold to speak to a nurse about my symptoms and possibly getting an appointment. My mother called me on the other line, letting me know that she got through and the receptionist told her that a nurse would call me and that they would go over my symptoms with me. I would be lying if I wasn't nervous about my symptoms due to COVID-19. But I reminded myself that it is also cold and flu season and to try to not jump to conclusions. The nurse called me back midday and reviewed my symptoms with me. I explained that I had a cough (the same cough from late February when I was sick, it hadn't gone away yet), body aches, a fever of 101, runny nose, and sore throat. She said that those sounded like flu-like symptoms and asked me if I had traveled to China or if I had been in contact with anyone that had tested positive with coronavirus. My answer to both of those questions was no. She told me that flu symptoms usually get worse around day 3 and that after that I should be feeling better. Again this was Friday, she told me that if I wasn't feeling better by Monday that I should call again.

Monday came around and I was feeling worse. I was starting to worry. Why am I sick again? What if I did come into contact with someone who just wasn't tested yet? At this point in time, there was a report of three people in Montana who had tested positive with COVID-19. As an aspiring medical writer, this event has made me want to further my education in public health. I know many decisions need to be made from guidance by officials and systems that were not in place or not efficient. For example the number of tests and how long the tests results take. Now I am not an expert. But I was concerned that I had visited the doctor twice in the past month for flu-like symptoms and I wasn't tested or questioned further about my possible contact with COVID-19. I cannot imagine how you would try and track this virus amongst so many people and the fact that it is also cold and flu season. When should you worry about a patient or yourself? And if you wait too long is it too late?

I felt worse so I made an appointment to go see the doctor on Monday. My primary doctor was not in so I saw a PA. I walked to the waiting room to check-in and because of my visit in February, I knew they would ask me to put a mask on if I had a cough. So I grabbed a mask before being asked and walked up to the receptionist. Wearing a mask twice in a hospital setting (I go to Bozeman Health) is an interesting experience. I felt contagious, dangerous, different. I experienced people staring in the lobby and avoiding me. The nurse calls me back, weighs me, and asks me about my symptoms. I explain them to her and reference my notes for the timeline. After a few minutes, the PA comes in. And affirms that it sounds like the flu. She mentioned that we could do a flu test to confirm but that it wouldn't help me feel better. I agreed

and didn't request a flu test. I told her about my concern about already being sick and how I now felt fluid, pressure, and pain in my ears. She checked my ears and said oh yes! They are very swollen and red. You have a double ear infection. She prescribed me antibiotics and told me to do the usual for the flu, plenty of fluids, and rest. She told me to "wait out the storm." Then we left. (We, Morgan my fiance and I. I asked him to come with me because I honestly didn't want to go to the doctor with the symptoms I had during this time. I was a little scared.) I was surprised by how quickly I was seen. Usually, I have to wait 15-20 minutes for the doctor and we were in and out in 45 minutes including check-in.

I stayed inside for a week because I was sick. Staying inside while continuously receiving vague emails about how this virus would be affecting the future months and along with the already canceled events made me sulk and stay in bed. This was my 2020 Spring Break.

In hindsight, I wish I would have asked for a COVID-19 test. They may have denied by a test because at this time the state had limited tests and was only giving them to patients with specific symptoms. However, I have always wondered if what I was sick with the second time was COVID-19? There is so much unknown, and sadly with the unknown, our first reaction is fear.

The week of March 30, was probably the week that I was the most overwhelmed. By this time classes had resumed and we had transitions online. Two big events where I was supposed to share my undergraduate research were canceled and the dates passed. I facilitated my first online studio for my job as a peer tutor at the MSU Writing Center. My fiance was now at home after Governor Bullock announced the stay at home order and only essential shops would be open. This week my mother received news from one of her employees that she had tested positive for COVID-19 and that my mom was one of the people she worked with last. Rewind about 8 weeks before this, my mom had a hysterectomy. She learned later that having major surgery left her immune-compromised and she had a higher likelihood of contracting a virus. So trying to fulfill my responsibilities as a student and peer tutor I was worried about my mother and my finances between my fiance and me. No one knew what the future held, the immediate or the distant future. I was supposed to keep on with my days and responsibilities as if none of this was happening? Some days my course work and tutor work were a good distraction and other days I was processing what was happening and the least of my worries were posting to an online discussion thread. My mom never showed symptoms. Her employee is doing better. But this goes to show what many people are having to juggle during this time. We are not "working from home, we are at home during a crisis trying to work."

While this pandemic has taken away a few opportunities for me, it has also given a few as well. As a citizen, I have noticed how the public is informed of this pandemic. This has interested me as a scholar and rhetorician. For my Digital Rhetorics course, I analyzed how public health agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization combat misinformation online about the pandemic. Misinformation is just as dangerous as the disease. This project and this pandemic have sparked an interest in me to focus on health communication in public health. I have learned about theories in risk communication that explain how messages must be directed to the right audience at the right time to enact exigency. This is similar to what I have learned in my undergrad as a Writing

major. I know I will be changed by this pandemic; I hope we as a society learn from this pandemic and change as well.

This semester I took a course titled, Sociology of Health and Medicine. In this course, we learned about Parson's Sick Role. Parson's Sick Role explains that when "sick" an individual has a different role in society. "A sick person is exempt from 'normal' social roles, depending on the condition and the physician's approval. A sick person is not responsible for the condition. A sick person should try to get well. And a sick person should seek help and cooperate with the physician" (Parsons, 1951). However, this theory is middle class-oriented, is only applicable to acute diseases, and assumes a 1 to 1 doctor relationship. After this pandemic, I hope people start to see the disparities that do not allow some people to have this sick person role as described by Parsons. I hope corporations are more lenient about sick days, perhaps even offer paid sick leave. I hope as a nation we reflect on our health system and invest and evolve. As a citizen and health communicator, I am observing how people in power are reacting and sadly not reacting in ways to help others. This pandemic does not affect everyone the same. It is time to realize this and do something about it.