FBN Position Statement on Masks

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Purpose

This position statement is intended to highlight the significant contribution that citizens can make to reducing the number of COVID-19 infections in their communities and to endorse the universal use of masks as an effective tool to support that effort.

Background

Pandemic preparedness and response have been a long-standing area of specialization and scholarship for the Florida Bioethics Network. Integrating ethical concepts into the overarching goals of pandemic management affirms that shared values and obligations will guide critical decisions and actions in the setting of contagion, scarcity and extreme environments. The distinctive nature of contagion is the driving force that expands and sustains a pandemic until it is disrupted by effective interventions. As our understanding of the vulnerabilities of each unique pathogen evolves, the number of options becomes more precise and effective.

During the current phase of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic the most effective tools, i.e., therapeutic cures and vaccines, are within reach, but the predicted Fall/Winter surge of infections is now under way, leading experts to re-examine how best to use existing resources to protect the population.

Rationale and evidence

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has been described as a humanitarian disaster. The United States leads the world with more than 10 million infections and more than 246,000 deaths. [1] Healthcare institutions and professionals have continued to honor their contract with society by mounting a courageous and robust response to treat and save the sick. Until the SARS-CoV-2 virus can be contained and reduced, their mission must continue.

Complementary but separate infection-prevention efforts are essential to ending the pandemic; this monumental task cannot succeed without public support and cooperation. As part of their reciprocal obligations under our social contract, citizens have historically been active in helping victims of disaster. However, their most important role during this highly infectious event, which relies on person-to-person transmission, was not fully appreciated until studies identified how the virus is transmitted and how to interrupt that

process.

- The SARS-CoV-2 virus is easily transmitted through airborne droplets and aerosols generated by talking, coughing or sneezing. [2, 3, 4]
- People who have symptoms and those who are infected but have not developed symptoms can transmit the virus. [5]
- Asymptomatic and presymptomatic individuals can be responsible for up to 50% of the overall attack rate in COVID-19 outbreaks. [6]
- Such "silent transmission alone can sustain outbreaks even if all symptomatic cases are immediately isolated" [7]

Masks reduce transmission and save lives

There is overwhelming evidence that something as simple and inexpensive as wearing a mask can impede the virus, reduce the number of people who die from it and ease the burden on hospitals and health professionals. The use of masks signals both enlightened self-interest and regard for the interests and well-being of others.

> Experimental and epidemiological data support community masking to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2. The prevention benefit of masking is derived from the combination of source control and personal protection is likely complimentary and synergistic, [8] so that individual benefit increases with increasing community mask use. [9]

The current level of mask use in Florida is 66 percent. [10] If mask use would increase to 95 percent, the predicted number of infections could be reduced by 4,600 by January 15, 2021 [11] Though this intervention does not allow for the immediate feedback found in typical disaster rescue situations, those who choose to wear masks are making a meaningful difference by *preventing* impending harm. Furthermore, becoming part of a larger community effort sets an inclusive example of beneficence, reciprocity and solidarity at a time when it is needed most.

Conclusion

The Florida Bioethics Network salutes the majority of citizens who have already made a commitment to wearing masks, and hopes that this endorsement will encourage others to participate in an effort to mitigate a predicted surge of cases. Until vaccines become widely available and the population reaches a sufficient level of immunity, masks will serve as an important tool to promote the safety and welfare of those in the community while also honoring the shared values and obligations of citizenship. Indeed, this is a rare and defining opportunity to participate in a safe and simple act of good will, an act that can touch the lives of so many.

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