

Bill Kaplan: Politics should not determine public health

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic: 44 million+ cases and 712,000+ deaths nationally, including 750,000+ cases and 8,100+ deaths in Wisconsin. And, now our kids are being infected: 5.7 million+ children's cases and 540+ deaths nationally, including 130,000+ cases and a few deaths in Wisconsin. Moreover, evidence is mounting that there are long-term health effects on the brain, heart, lungs and kidneys for adults and kids.

Now is the time to listen to doctors and scientists. Louisiana GOP Senator Bill Cassidy, also a doctor, said: "Whenever politicians mess with public health, usually it doesn't work out well for public health." He is not alone. In 2006, New York GOP Representative Sherwood Boehlert said: "We should be guided by sound science. We shouldn't have politics determining science." And, then Wisconsin Democratic Representative Dave Obey made the same point to me a few years ago.

However, COVID-19 is hitting rural Wisconsin the hardest, an area with inadequate health care facilities, overstretched doctors and nurses, lack of health care coverage and a disproportionately elderly, sick population. Tragically, vaccination rates are lower in Wisconsin's rural counties. Too many are letting some self-serving politicians deceive them. Wisconsin would not be a great state without its family farms and a healthy rural population. What's needed is straight talk.

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Francis Collins, longtime head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has announced he is retiring. "Among Dr. Collins' contributions during the pandemic

was to assemble the public-private partnership that put together protocols which enabled the accelerated clinical trials for the pandemic vaccines. And, NIH supported the research and development of the remarkable mRNA (COVID-19) vaccine technology” (Washington Post). Collins is also a born-again Christian. Collins said: “And that, for somebody who is a believer, this is what you could call an answer to prayer. If we’ve all been praying to God to somehow deliver us from this terrible pandemic, and what happens is these vaccines get developed that are safe and effective, well, why wouldn’t you want to say ‘Thank you God’ and roll up your sleeve?”

Tommy Thompson, UW System president, worked with Collins when he was Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) during the Bush Administration. Thompson recently said: “As the former Secretary of (HHS), I have seen firsthand how vaccines are developed and tested. Operation Warp Speed (Trump administration) helped produce a vaccine in short order, a tremendous medical and technological achievement. But it was not rushed, as some have contended, and the science behind it was years in the making. The clinical trials were rigorous and thorough. ... The only way to get back to the normalcy of pre-pandemic life is to make sure enough of us are vaccinated against the virus.”

Thompson is an effective persuader. Many UW campuses have reached 70+ percent vaccinated. More than ever the unvaccinated must step up to get vaccinated. As Pope Francis said: getting vaccinated is “an act of love ... to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable.”

Time to “roll up your sleeve.” Now!

— *Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.*