



“This is the moment in which we can rethink the concept of health”

Matthew Taylor talks with virologist Ilaria Capua about the lessons we should learn from Covid-19

Matthew Taylor: How has the Covid-19 crisis changed your thinking as a scientist, a former politician and an academic?

Ilaria Capua: One of the things I would have never expected, and which is probably one of the main drivers of this dramatic situation, is denial.

I spent most of my life working in a laboratory setting to generate evidence on how to prepare for, manage and contain the spread of epidemic diseases and pandemic threats. I contributed to pandemic preparedness documents which implied that all governments and recipients would comply with WHO and international guidelines. Remember the discourse at the start of Covid-19? Many believed that it was not going to spread further than China. And when the virus arrived in Italy, the feeling in some areas of Europe was that this was only going to be an Italian problem. Driven by political considerations and electoral apathy, among other issues, our pandemic preparedness was what it was. But as far as I know, in no existing pandemic preparedness plan were there any instructions on how to achieve general consensus, encourage appropriate reactions and execute the required actions in a coordinated way.

Taylor: It’s a direct consequence of polarisation, populism and fake news, and you yourself have been subject to a fake news attack. One of the lessons is that a world where people politicise facts is a vulnerable world. Do you think that’s the major reason why we didn’t respond in the way that we should?

Capua: We didn’t have a plan to start getting the right information out there in the face of leaders and governments who were often transmitting conflicting messages. It doesn’t matter whether it was deliberate or not, the point is that scientists knew that this was going to happen, but nobody believed us.

There was a lot of work around pandemic preparedness plans in relation to bird flu in the mid-2000s. I pushed for sequence sharing of viruses at a time when that was not being done, and that’s what led to some of the trouble I experienced. I was accused of being a virus trafficker and of wanting to make money out of a business that didn’t exist just because I was trying to promote sharing virus sequences.

H5N1 bird flu did not become a pandemic. We had a vaccine, we had diagnostics, we had surveillance systems. But because it did not become a pandemic, it was perceived by the general public as a hoax.

This brings us to 2009, when there was a flu pandemic caused by a swine-origin virus. It turned out to be a ‘mild’ pandemic, due to multiple drivers. The first is that it was caused by an H1N1 virus, and although none of our generation or our kids had antibodies to that particular type of virus, older people who had been exposed to the viruses of the tail of the Spanish flu pandemic – which went all the way to the late 1950s – were protected. Therefore, the vulnerable population had antibodies and often didn’t get seriously ill. Second, we rapidly developed vaccines, and then we had treatment options. We got a bit lucky because it was mild, rather milder than predicted. But do you know what this caused? A false belief, leading

Ilaria Capua is Director of the One Health Center of Excellence at the University of Florida. Her book, *Circular Health: Empowering the One Health Revolution*, is out now

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