



Opinion Editorial

July 7, 2020
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Let's Take the Politics Out of Masks

The subject of the masks we wear used to be just an abstract discussion considered by poets and philosophers. Recently, though, it has become a very concrete, current issue on the minds of many. And, as with most topics these days, it has turned into a controversial political theme. On the one hand are a growing number of local governmental entities (and some states) that have decided to require the wearing of a face covering in public. These entities cite the pandemic and other laws such as bans on smoking in certain places as justification. (Gov. Laura Kelly's [Executive Order](#) is an example, although ultimate authority in Kansas appears to be in the hands of local governments.) On the other hand, are those who argue that requiring the wearing of masks in public places is an invasive affront to personal freedoms and amounts to governmental overreach. The governor of Nebraska, for example, recently mandated that local governments would not receive any federal CARES Act money if they enacted mask requirements.

I will leave it up to others to determine whether a governmental requirement for face coverings in the time of a pandemic is a violation of an individual's constitutional rights. I'm frankly tired of these debates because I think they divert our attention from the real issue, which is this: what is the best way to stem the spread of this disease? The obvious answer is a vaccine and/or earlier and more effective treatment, and there is optimism on this front. But until that time, our public health experts advise us that proper hygiene, maintaining your distance from others, and wearing a mask are the most effective ways of protecting ourselves and those around us.

It is certainly true that the advice concerning masks has not been consistent, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Most recently, however, there is growing understanding among the experts that wearing a mask, especially when indoors and when unable to social distance, is a significant tool in slowing the spread of the virus. For example, the leaders of both the Kansas Department of Health and Environment in Topeka and the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington have urged Americans to wear masks. And, for what it's worth, there also seems to be increasing agreement among politicians of all stripes.

COVID-19 is not going to be talked into oblivion by political rhetoric. It will, however, ultimately be defeated by our strong resolve to develop a vaccine and more effective treatment. In the meantime, why not use that same resolve to listen to, and act on, the consensus advice of public health experts?

***About the Author:** Tom Bell is the president and CEO of Kansas Hospital Association, a voluntary, non-profit organization existing to be the leading advocate and resource for members. KHA membership includes 217 member facilities, of which 123 are full-service, community hospitals. Founded in 1910, KHA's vision is: "Optimal Health for Kansans."*

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