

Three Minute Read™

Insights from the Healing American Healthcare Coalition™

February 2021-2



From the Editor: Despite daily vaccination rates climbing and confirmed cases declining, America's Covid-19 death toll has passed the 500,000 mark. With 4% of the world's population, the US accounts for 25% of cases and 20% of deaths. This issue of **TMR** looks at politics vs. science, reduced life expectancy, hospital acquired conditions and preventing the next pandemic. To access each article, just click on the headline.



[S.D. Governor Gives State High Marks in Handling the Pandemic. Are They Deserved?](#), by Carmen Heredia Rodriguez,

Kaiser Health News/Politifact, 2/12/21

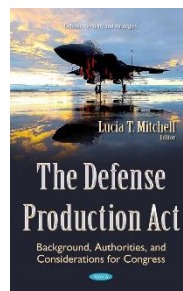
TMR Topline™ - South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem claims that, despite her refusal to enact a mask mandate or close any businesses, her state “*got through it better than virtually every other state.*” Asked the reasons for the claim, communications director Ian Fury cited vaccine distribution, unemployment, the number of people moving to the state and the state’s \$19 million budget surplus. However, its per capita death rate of 201/100,000 at 1/31 places it in the top 10 states, and there were reports in December of Covid patients being transferred out-of-state due to limited ICU capacity. The state experienced less of an economic decline than initially projected due to federal aid and conservative revenue projections. South Dakota is one of the top states in per capita vaccination rates. The article concluded that Noem’s statement “*cherry-picked the data, emphasizing the state’s economy while giving less weight to the lives lost and the burden of disease its residents suffered.*”



[Fauci is awarded a \\$1 million prize in Israel, including for ‘speaking truth to power.’](#), by Isabel Kershner, New York Times, 2/15/21

TMR Topline™ - The three 2020 awards from the Dan David Foundation and Tel Aviv University are for outstanding contributions in public health, noting that “*He has been widely praised for his courage in speaking truth to power in a highly charged environment.*” Dr. Anthony Fauci won in the “Present” category for his scientific contributions, including his research and his efforts to inform the public about the pandemic.

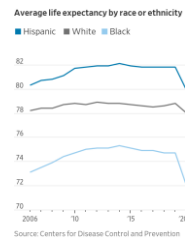
TMR’s Take – Governor Noem’s chutzpah ranks with Belgium’s Health Minister Maggie De Block who, despite having the highest fatality rate in the OECD, defended her government’s response, noting with pride that Belgium never ran out of hospital beds. August’s 10 day Sturgis SD Motorcycle Rally was a super spreader on steroids. Neighboring states might take issue with the governor’s claim. Conversely, Israel’s recognition of Dr. Fauci is well-deserved.



[Biden Says He Invoked Production Law For More Vaccine Doses](#), by Justin Sink, Josh Wingrove and Jennifer Epstein, Bloomberg, 2/16/21

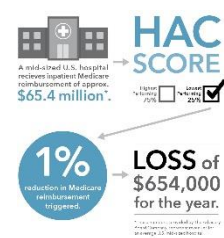
TMR Topline™ - President Joe Biden said that Moderna Inc. and Pfizer Inc. agreed to sell more doses of their coronavirus vaccine to the U.S. faster than planned after he invoked the Defense Production Act, a law that allows the government to nationalize commercial production in emergencies. In a CNN town hall event in Milwaukee on Tuesday, He touted his administration’s ramp-up of vaccine shipments while also warning that the pandemic won’t soon end: “*We got them to move up time because we used the National Defense Act to be able to help the manufacturing piece of it, to get more equipment.*”

TMR's Take – President Biden's campaign promised that controlling the pandemic was a top priority and his actions since taking office are delivering on that promise.



[COVID-19 has already cut U.S. life expectancy by a year. For Black Americans, it's worse](#), PBS News Hour, 2/18/21

TMR Topline™ - A report released by the National Center for Health Statistics, part of the CDC, for the first six months of 2020 show an alarming decline of one year in life expectancy for Americans. Demographer Elizabeth Arias, the report's lead author, noted that Black men are experiencing a drop in life expectancy comparable to 1942-43, when the average American's lifespan dropped by 2.9 years. The [1918-19 pandemic](#) saw U.S. life expectancy drop by 11 years. The U.S. also saw a decline from [2015-17](#) due to an increase in drug abuse deaths and suicide rates.



[Medicare Cuts Payment to 774 Hospitals Over Patient Complications](#), by Jordan Rau, Kaiser Health News, 2/19/21

TMR Topline™ - The [Hospital-Acquired Condition Reduction Program](#) is penalizing 774 hospitals for having the highest rates of patient infections or other potentially avoidable medical complications between mid-2017 and 2019 (pre-pandemic). They will lose 1% of their Medicare payments over 12 months beginning 10/1/21 for being in the top quarter for preventable conditions like sepsis, central line infections, catheter-associated UTIs, etc. Created by the ACA to motivate hospitals to protect patients from harm, the program is in its 7th year. According to the CDC, on any given day, 1 in 31 patients has an infection that was contracted during the stay. The American Hospital Association describes the penalties as "a game of chance" based on "badly flawed" measures. Renowned hospitals penalized this year include LA's Cedars-Sinai, New York-Presbyterian and Vanderbilt.

TMR's Take – The shocking decline in life expectancy is likely to be higher when data are compiled for the full year since Covid-19 deaths were 100,000 higher during the second half of 2020. The AHA has a valid point – the data should be risk adjusted. Here in New Jersey, all three Level 1 Trauma Centers are penalized virtually every year. That said, both articles reinforce the need for comprehensive healthcare reform with robust public health and disease prevention programs. America's

hospitals excel at treating illness, but face infection prevention challenges daily.



[The Five Things to Get Right Before the Next Pandemic](#), by Robert Langerth, Bloomberg Business Week, 2/3/21

TMR Topline™ - In January 2017, GlaxoSmithKline submitted a 112-page proposal to HHS's Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority to prevent future pandemics. Created in 2006, BARDA is charged with developing and procuring drugs and vaccines and ensuring that the U.S. is researching pandemic influenza and other emerging infectious threats. After the 2014 Ebola outbreak, Glaxo researchers wanted to identify viruses likely to cause major epidemics and tackle several concurrently. The proposal was not funded, leaving the world without a key weapon when Covid-19 emerged. Protecting the U.S. from the next pandemic will require:

- 1. Increasing pathogen surveillance.* The EcoHealth Alliance suggests tracking emerging viruses so that we can intervene before they wreak havoc. A Johns Hopkins epidemiologist suggests a kind of National Weather Service for pandemics that would help predict the course of emerging pathogens.
- 2. Repairing and augmenting the WHO.* In January an independent panel convened by the WHO blasted the [current epidemic alert system](#) as "slow, cumbersome, and indecisive." The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations suggests a "biological NATO" to defend the world against developing pathogens.
- 3. Genetic sequencing.* Frequent, intensive viral sequencing would help answer questions such as how widely a given strain spreads within a community like a school and whether the strain might mutate to become resistant to existing vaccines.
- 4. Developing more vaccines, faster.* Strategies include getting to phase 3 clinical trials faster and maintaining standby manufacturing capacity and supplies.
- 5. Ironing out distribution and logistics.* Adapting logistics in a healthcare system as large and complicated as the U.S. takes months of advanced planning, and databases to keep track of everything. It didn't happen in 2020.

TMR's Take – The author's right: failing to put more extensive infrastructure in place ahead of time was a blunder that ranks with the May 2018 decision to disband the NSC's pandemic response unit. President Biden's \$20 billion proposal to speed up vaccination rollouts is a start, but a complete plan is needed. Covid-19 is the 5th major outbreak of the 21st century. It won't be the last.