



By: TA | AP Insight

Will there be more trust in science and governments regarding hantavirus than during COVID?



The lingering impact of COVID-19, a few years out from the declaration that the pandemic was over, is scattered across how we live today – the work-from-home jobs, the way some have decided wearing masks is their new normal, the hand sanitizer dispensers that remain ever present.

Some of the other ripples, though, aren't as obvious. They're the ones we carry inside us – grief over lost loved ones, chronic health conditions, the sense of lives interrupted.

And in recent days, another one has made itself known in the wake of a rare hantavirus outbreak aboard a cruise ship: the fear, despite official reassurances, that it might be happening again.

But the flourishing of fear, whether on a personal or societal level, can also be an indicator that something else is missing.

Perhaps there's no post-pandemic reality more entrenched than the damage done, in the U.S. and globally, to the bonds that in the before times, many would have considered secure – science, government, information itself.

“COVID undermined our trust in what most of us used to trust,” said Elisa Jayne Bienenstock, a research professor and sociologist at Arizona State University. “When general trust goes down, when there’s a lot of cynicism, who are people looking to, to explain what to do and how the world works?”

What it used to be and what it is now

Before 2020, the outbreak of some illness somewhere didn't usually cause massive concern outside of the specific areas impacted, even as some epidemics caused significant numbers of deaths.

Some of that was complacency in the face of a world where widespread travel wasn't as accessible to the masses as it has become,

which was a key part of COVID-19's spread.

In fact, there have been outbreaks of the current strain of hantavirus in some South American countries through the decades, like one in 1997 in Chile.

Other countries have had epidemics of a range of illnesses from cholera to dengue to SARS, and the U.S. has seen [West Nile](#), Legionnaire's and more.

But in a post-COVID-19 world, it didn't take long before questions and concerns surfaced about disease spread in the days immediately following the first reports that three people had died from hantavirus on the ship.

Health experts have repeatedly emphasized that even though the virus can cause serious illness in those infected, the risk of spread in the general public is low

Since then, there have been reports of [11 hantavirus](#) cases around the world linked to the cruise, according to the World Health Organization, and that includes the deaths. Lab testing has confirmed eight of the cases.

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Despite that, when ship passengers were taken to the Spanish island of Tenerife to disembark, residents like Samantha Aguero were concerned.

“We feel a bit unsafe. We don't feel as there are 100% security measures in place to welcome it,” she said. “This is a virus, after all, and we have lived this during the pandemic.”

Institutions are diminished for many

Bienenstock points to three institutions that

have suffered from the public's loss of trust: government, media and science itself. But government officials and journalists were dealing with issues of public mistrust well before the **pandemic**.

The mistrust of science got ammunition not because scientists were making mistakes in their processes but because nonscientists didn't have the same understanding, she said.

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"Most people don't think of science as a process. In their mind, science is an answer, it's a fact. And so when those facts showed that they weren't 100% reliable and assured, it started undermining trust in the science," she said.

"One of the problems with COVID is it undermined that confidence in science for people who don't understand how science works. It showed the process. And it showed that scientists don't always have the answer," Bienenstock said.

"A lot of people in crisis, when they fear things, don't care what the answer is, as long as there's a definitive answer. And science doesn't provide that when it doesn't know."

Now what?

It's not just about the issue at the forefront of people's attention at the moment. There are ripple effects as well.

"COVID ... didn't just heighten people's sensitivity to health threats. It did so unevenly, in ways often disconnected from actual risk," said Michele Gelfand, professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. "As trust in institutions has weakened, people have lost a

key way to navigate uncertainty together. Without trust, people rely more on rumor, fear, and emotion, which can lead them to overreact to small risks and underreact to serious ones."



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Karlynn Morgan, a 76-year-old retired nurse-anesthetist in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, has seen that heightened attention, with more people without a medical or science background talking about health issues than before the pandemic.

She has also been disturbed by the increase in what looks to her like a lack of trust in science, as seen in **falling vaccination rates** and rising instances of diseases like measles.

"I think people are far less trusting because people used to take their children and just get the vaccine," she said. "When I was a kid, there was no question you were going to go get your shot."

If trust is going to be rebuilt, Gelfand said in an email, then leaders have to get involved.

"They set the threat signal. They determine whether people get accurate information about the level of danger or distorted information that serves a political agenda. When leaders send clear, honest signals, people can calibrate in the face of threat. When leaders manipulate threat for their own purposes, norms erode and trust collapses," Gelfand said.

"Strong, reliable institutions have historically

been our superpower as a society. They're what allow millions of people to coordinate under uncertainty without knowing each other personally," she said. "Without that institutional backbone, we lose the very capacity for collective action that has helped human groups survive for millennia."