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Contact Tracing COVID-19

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We live in unprecedented times. The years 2020-21 have been a period of distancing, isolation, speculation, hysteria, fear, and the addition of protective face masks to our everyday apparel. We have adjusted and adapted our day-to-day lives in response to the pandemic. The words “quarantine,” “self-isolate,” and “contact tracing” have become all too familiar.

Contact tracing is not new in the realm of disease epidemiology, but many of us still are puzzled by what a contact tracer does. Contact tracing of diseases has been a practice performed throughout history, consisting of much of the basic methodology John Snow utilized in his famous spatial analysis of a deadly cholera outbreak in London in 1854. Snow was an English physician who pioneered the tracing and mapping of disease. He did this by interviewing patients and their families. In this manner, he was able to trace their movements and make spatial correlations with their deaths, ultimately discovering an innocuous water pump on Broad Street as the common thread that tied together all those afflicted and the source of the cholera outbreak.

Now I ask you this: What if instead of a stationary and inanimate water pump transmitting the disease, it was numerous mobile and living sources? Yes, COVID-19 is quite different than locating the single source of a cholera outbreak, both in terms of scale and complexity. However, many of the lessons and techniques first implemented almost two centuries ago still hold true.

Contact tracing COVID-19 is done by a team that interviews and informs people who may have been in contact or exposed to somebody diagnosed with COVID-19. This is part in the larger objective of stopping transmission. To stop the spread of COVID-19, movements and interactions are traced to create a mosaic or pattern of contact.

Reaching out to those who have become exposed starts on the level of the individual contact tracer, which can be employed by various agencies and organizations working at a multitude of geographic scales. There is a great deal of mystery and misinformation about what it is exactly these contact tracers do. Luckily, I had the pleasure to interview my mother, Joy Jones, who is a contact tracer for Los Angeles County. She was happy to fill in the grey areas and introduce us to what contact tracing COVID-19 entails.

**Jonesy: Please introduce yourself and your position.**

Joy: My name is Joy Lavin-Jones. I am a manager for State Unit Two, teams 12, 13, and 14 with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

**Jonesy: How did you become a contact tracer?**

Joy: The governor of California called for an immediate hiring of state workers to train and become contact tracers for California. I was nominated by an employee and I met all the requirements and once I expressed interest, I was offered the job and I accepted.

**Jonesy: Please explain what you do.**

Joy: I started as a phone interviewer for LA county, then was promoted to a managerial role. It is now my job to make sure teams have what they need and answer any questions. It seems like there are new and unique challenges that arise every single day. I also schedule meetings with team leads, and I’ll also fill in as an interviewer for case investigations if needed.

**Jonesy: How do people typically respond to calls from interviewers or to news they may have come into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19?**

Joy: Based on my experience—and I have no data to back this up, this is just my opinion and
experience—90% of contacts that I have spoken with are completely cooperative. They are generally pretty relieved that they have someone to inform them of this potential danger, and they typically have loads of questions that I will do my best to answer. It is key to have good interviewers, and, in my case, I do. I will say that once again this is anecdotal and just my experience.

**Jonesy:** What happens if the contact you are interviewing is showing symptoms?

Joy: We will make a presumptive positive addition and immediately inform them that they need to isolate. In this instance, we provide them with whatever resources they might need. The contact then becomes a case, a new investigation is open for them and the appropriate steps and actions are then taken.

**Jonesy:** Where does your information go? Where does your information come from?

Joy: We have access to large databases that are used and shared by LA County. These databases we have access to are IRIS and CRM. Then lab results go into the IRIS database (both positive and negative) and then County management distributes the positive cases to local contact tracing interviewers.

**Jonesy:** What resources do you have for those who contract COVID-19?

Joy: There are tons. However, LA County is so big we can’t deal with providing personalized resources unless it is a special circumstance, like somebody who is homeless or pregnant. Some of the resources we can provide are eviction protection, attorneys on staff, numerous websites on medications, and how to isolate properly. In fact, we have an entire call center devoted to providing resources to those in need.

**Jonesy:** What actions are in place to protect sensitive groups, such as undocumented residents?

Joy: LA county has no interest in citizen status. This is all confidential public health info. It is unfortunate that there are no federal resources available for groups like those who are undocumented because COVID-19 does not care about your citizenship.

**Jonesy:** How has contact tracing been successful?

Joy: Well, let’s see, there are two main goals of contact tracing. First is establishing contact with the person who has either tested positive or has been exposed to someone who has tested positive to COVID-19 and make sure they isolate or quarantine properly and provide them with resources to do this and answer any questions they might have. The second goal is to learn about others who may have been exposed and gather detailed data about them, such as demographic information that could potentially show how the disease moves throughout communities and where there might be a need for additional focus and outreach. This is also important to forecast where COVID-19 may spread.

**Jonesy:** How has contact tracing been unsuccessful?

Joy: Early on, as we were all learning about the disease, it wasn’t very successful. It has, however, improved dramatically with an increase in publicization and the interviewers have improved over time with different styles of communicating, the more interviews conducted, the more practice and experience the interviewers get. I also wish the resources contact tracers provide could be more personalized despite the large volumes of cases. One big issue that I have is that those who pay their phone service providers for caller ID that shows who is calling them, in the case of contact tracing interviewers they will see that the call is from LA County Department of Public Health, but if they don’t pay for this caller ID, they will see a 1-800 number that often gets ignored. In my opinion, this is a public health and safety emergency and is similar an Amber Alert notification. Nobody must pay additionally to see an Amber Alert—the phone companies are forced to send them out. It is all the same number for LA county contact tracing interviewers and would only take one number for the phone companies to program to become recognizable. I am currently trying to get this recognized and changed.

**Jonesy:** How long do you think COVID-19 contact tracing will continue?

Joy: It will go on for a while. I believe the number of contact tracing interviewers will decrease with a successful vaccine that will lower the incidents of the disease. I also hope that the state employees that have been redirected to work with the local public health jurisdiction can begin to return back to their normal jobs and positions.