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COVID-19 Employer Perspective with Dr. Scott Gottlieb (June 23, 2020)

Dr. Scott Gottlieb
COVID-19 Employer Perspective
Tuesday, June 23, 2020

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Despite most likely having to endure one more cycle of an uptake in COVID-19 cases this fall or winter, businesses, colleges and schools can reopen safely provided they take measures to reduce the risk of a large outbreak, said Scott Gottlieb, MD, a practicing physician and 23rd Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). More than 200 people registered for the webinar provided to Lehigh Valley Business Coalition on Healthcare (LVBCH) members and guests.

An expected resurgence of the virus in the fall, most likely combined with the flu, will create a complex situation. Even so, he encouraged employers to develop a strategy to safely reopen. “You’re going to have an employee who has a case of COVID-19, it’s still in the community,” he said. “But you can create a workplace that is reasonably safe. You don’t have to have an outbreak. You can control for that.”

He suggested such tactics as:

- Enabling employees who can to continue to work from home, especially those at risk or “older” patients, defined as 50 and older.
- De-densifying the workplace by creating clusters of small groups of 20 or so employees who work only with one another and do not mingle with other employee groups. Then, in the event that employees get COVID-19, exposure is restricted to that small group.
- Continuing to social distance and employing videoconferencing even for employees in the same organization or the same office.
- Using a collective health app that would require employees to sign on each day and answer questions. If the employees’ answers indicate that they might have COVID-19 symptoms, they would be instructed not to come to work but rather to get testing.
- Requiring some measure of monitoring, such as pooled testing.

Although social distancing is best, if employees have to work together, then they should be provided with the proper equipment such as N-95 masks. Similarly, Dr. Gottlieb said that depending on whether the number of new COVID-19 cases are rising in August, there may be an opportunity for school districts and college campuses to reopen in the fall. “I think schools should try to reopen and be flexible knowing that they may need to close again,” he said. The decision of whether to open or not can be made on the local

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level based on where the regions of spread are. For example, in his state of Connecticut, some areas are still seeing rising cases and may decide to remain closed, whereas many districts in the northern area of the state are not and could reopen safely.

While it appears that children are less vulnerable to the virus, when it comes to the epidemic, we don't really know what it would look like in a school-age population. In the spring, school districts quickly closed to reduce the spread and parents have done a good job of limiting their children's exposure to the virus.

College students are more at risk for getting the virus, spreading it asymptotically and becoming ill from it even though most young adults recover without serious complications. In both cases, officials should consider how to keep faculty members safe and do routine testing and contact tracing to reduce spread. "Colleges have the virtue of having a lot of control over their populations, even more so than employers," he said. He suggested shutting down intermural activities and limiting the number of people who go in and out of the campus. "Create a bubble around the school."

Tactics needed to ensure safety while reopening this year will be onerous and expensive, Dr. Gottlieb admitted, but on a positive note they should be needed for only one more cycle of an increase in the number of infections. He is confident there will be a vaccine widely available in 2021. Likewise, more effective treatments will become available. COVID-19 is the type of virus that epidemiologists and population health experts had feared would arise, he added. It's the worst combination of a virus because it spreads effortlessly and asymptotically and causes a lot of death and disease. It can spread for weeks and months without anyone detecting it which is what happened in some of the worst hit areas like New York, New Jersey, Paris and Milan and what is currently happening in areas of southern United States, including Florida, Texas, Arizona and Alabama. "This is a bad infection, a once in a generation pathogen," he said.

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ABOUT DR. SCOTT GOTTLIEB



Scott Gottlieb, MD is a physician and served as the 23rd Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Dr. Gottlieb’s work focuses on advancing public health through developing and implementing innovative approaches to improving medical outcomes, reshaping healthcare delivery, and expanding consumer choice and safety.

Dr. Gottlieb is an aggressive advocate for advancing the health of patients, promoting healthcare access, and driving innovation. The agency’s historic and prolific advances in new policy distinguished his tenure as the FDA’s commissioner, in addition to a record-setting number of approvals of novel drugs, medical devices, and generic medicines.

Under his leadership, the FDA advanced new frameworks for the modern and safe and effective oversight of gene therapies, cell based regenerative medicines, targeted drugs, and digital health devices. The agency implemented new reforms to standardize drug reviews and make historic improvements of post market data collection and the use of real world evidence. They promoted policies to reduce death and disease from tobacco, improve food innovation and safety, and aggressively confront addiction crises.

Previously, Dr. Gottlieb served as the FDA’s Deputy Commissioner for Medical and Scientific Affairs and before that, as a Senior Adviser to the Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, where he helped advance policies to improve healthcare quality and promote the effective use of new medical technologies. A healthcare futurist, he has worked as a venture capitalist and founder and board member to companies that have developed new medicines and advance the delivery of healthcare. Dr. Gottlieb is widely published in leading medical journals and periodicals, including The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and The Washington Post. He has held editorial positions on the British Medical Journal and the Journal of the American Medical Association and appears regularly as a guest commentator on CNBC. Fortune Magazine recognized him as one of the “World’s 50 Greatest Leaders” in 2018 and again in 2019. Modern Healthcare named Dr. Gottlieb as one of the “Most Influential Physician Executive and Leaders” in its annual survey of 50 physician executives, and Time magazine named Gottlieb one of its “50 People Transforming Healthcare in 2018.”

Dr. Gottlieb was a practicing hospitalist and a Clinical Assistant Professor at the New York University School of Medicine. He is a member of the National Academy of Medicine and a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC.

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