

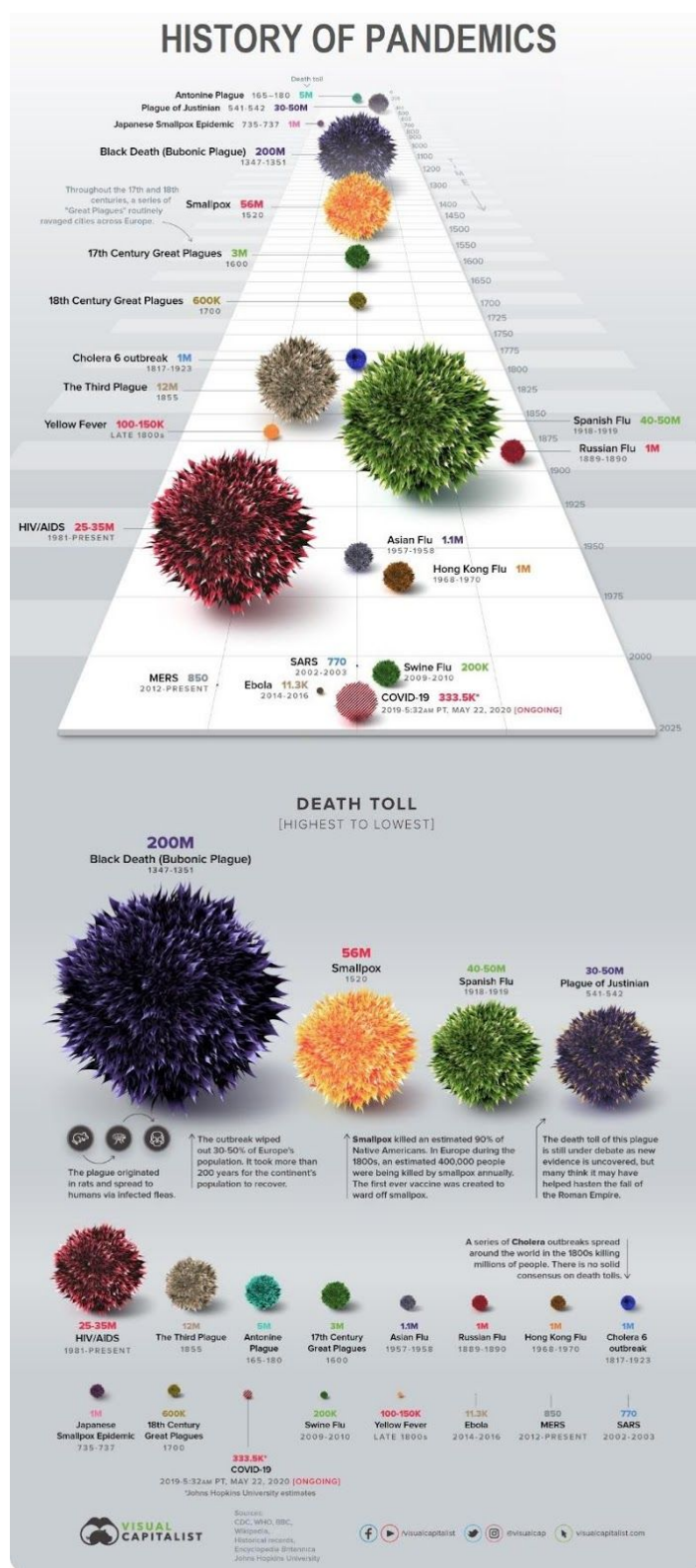
History of Pandemics: What Did We Learn from Yesterday?

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The year 2020 gave the word “pandemic” a common meaning for people from all over the world. That being, the COVID’19 disease. As of March 11, 2020; World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID’19 has been moved to the pandemic disease category. This means that WHO classified COVID’19 in the same class as some infamous diseases such as Cholera, Smallpox, Swine Flu, and the Bubonic Plague. We are familiar with these diseases’ names since the name pandemic itself means “the worldwide spread of a new disease”. But here arises the question: How do COVID’19 and past pandemics compare?

There are numerous records of pandemics, with the oldest one dating back to 2nd century AD. The Bubonic Plague, Measles, Smallpox, Cholera, Influenza, Tuberculosis, and Typhus are the most common pandemics that hit humanity over the course of history. Pandemics are usually followed by smaller outbreaks of the disease in the following years. And in many cases, the disease is never eradicated. In fact, there are still people dying from the Bubonic Plague in the world. But many of these diseases are now better known and there are many curing techniques for them which make them less dangerous. There is only one disease in the world that has been completely eradicated, Smallpox. On the chart, you can see that the Smallpox Pandemic was the 2nd most deadly pandemic ever, yet thanks to vaccination the world is now free of it. Smallpox is an example where it started badly but ended surprisingly well thanks to the realization of the effectiveness of vaccines. However, even the Smallpox was devastating in its emergence period.

Historically, there were 2 main reasons of a disease emerging into a pandemic. Firstly, when an entirely new or evolved pathogen starts spreading to people, the number of immune people is extremely low, if there is any. Because of this, people are much more vulnerable to a new disease than they are to the older ones. Some examples of the diseases’ first outbreaks that turned into a pandemic are; the First Cholera Pandemic (1817-1824), the Plague of Justinian (541-542), the Spanish Flu (1918-1920) and the COVID’19. The



second reason is the insufficiency of humanity's scientific development. Although this is a much smaller contributor to today's diseases, this had a major effect on the historical outbreaks. People who had little to no idea neither on the reasons nor on the cures of diseases were often helpless against the disease. In some cases, wrong beliefs even led to further spread of the disease. One such example happened during the Black Death Pandemic. Back at the time, doctors believed that the disease transmitted through the air and wore beak-like masks stuffed with herbs and scents to protect themselves, which had no benefit. But a worse belief was that of the priests'. They believed that God was punishing the Europeans because they washed a lot and sinned a lot. Therefore, they advised people not to wash and to obey whatever the Church ordered them. Of course, they had a huge political gain from this, however, the human losses rose greatly because of the lack of sanitation. Another misconception was the belief that some ethnic minorities' "heretic behavior" was responsible for the disease. Believing this, many people punished or even murdered these minorities.

The social response of people to COVID'19 is pretty similar to many past pandemics. Of course, the reaction is unique to every individual, but we can see some general patterns among people that we also saw in previous pandemics. To say, ethnic hatred can be still encountered as a reaction to COVID these days. Since the disease spread to Europe and America, we see an enormously rising number of xenophobia against the Chinese people. Some people try to avoid contact from the ones they think are "the source of the disease", some others define the illness as "Chinese Virus", whereas some extremists physically or verbally attack the people that they discriminate.

Another one of such general trends is the spreading of rumours. Today, we are still discussing whether the Swine Flu was caused by a lab accident or not, while we discuss the exact same issue about COVID. Although this rumour is rather harmless, we see quite harmful rumours like some doctors' suggestions to take a specific medicine to prevent people from catching COVID. In reality, that medicine is part of the treatment to be taken after someone has the virus, not as a preventative measure to be used before contamination. Because of this suggestion, many people started to take this medicine without a doctor's supervision, which is both harmful to the person's health and for the hospitals which are trying to get as much of the medicine as possible.

There is one other general approach to the COVID, which is denial. This does not mean that some people deny the existence of the disease, but they deny the seriousness of it. Most of them claim that the precautions taken are too harsh to the economic and social life and will harm humanity greatly. Of course, in most cases, the decision regarding the precautions is for the governments to make. But some of these people are the ones who make these decisions, such as the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro. Denial has been a problem for a long time in the form of the anti-vaccination movement. Since 1763, there have always been debates upon the risks of vaccines and their possible side effects. However, it is a proven fact that vaccines save millions of lives every year as well as helping to eradicate diseases. When the vaccine for the COVID'19 is found, if it does, we may also see a similar anti-vaccination movement, but probably a weak one due to the great and obvious harm caused by the disease.

There have been many conferences and academic studies regarding the precautions and course of actions taken for possible future pandemics. One such example can be the "WHO Checklist for Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Planning", which was written in April 2005. Thanks to these studies and articles, both the WHO and the governments have a good understanding of the current pandemic. It would not be wrong to address this consciousness as the reason we are going through this pandemic with much fewer cases and deaths than we anticipated. US President Trump's expectation for COVID'19 fatalities in his country was 200.000 people in March, whereas he recently restated this number as 100.000. Furthermore, modern social distancing techniques and quarantine

methods that were developed through past pandemics, from Bubonic Plague up until Swine Flu and SARS, were used effectively in the fight against COVID, making human efforts much more effective.

To conclude, in today's society, it is both easier and harder than ever to give the fight against the COVID pandemic. It is easier thanks to all the developments in medicine and science, but harder due to the globalized world and the lack of infrastructure to suspend the unprecedented human population of 2020's world. Let us hope that we learned the necessary lessons from the past to save our future.