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The Number

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Synopsis

This is a story from the heart on COVID-19, penned around April 4, 2020, in the early days of the pandemic.

Being a student of mathematics, I always loved numbers, from their patterns to their applications. However, this time it is painful.

This has been bothering me for some time. I tried to avoid it for many days. But it is so compelling, so hard. Sorry for writing my personal thoughts.

It was the end of December 2019. I was preparing my slides for a talk at the Joint Mathematics Meetings (JMM 2020) that would be held in Denver, Colorado on Jan 15-18, 2020. Among others, I was preparing few slides to talk on the mathematical modeling of the recent Ebola outbreak. Suddenly, I read news on a novel Coronavirus outbreak in China. I was curious and surprised to read the headlines of the Chinese government building mega-hospitals within days in the city of Wuhan, China, in early January 2020. I followed every thread and read whatever was available to me.

Still the Coronavirus was at a distance. Life was smooth, precious but surprisingly normal.

Quickly, it jumped continents. Gradually, TV news channels here started reporting on the Coronavirus as “novel COVID-19” in Iran and Italy. The increasing numbers of positives and deaths were soon skyrocketing. Instantly it became a household name in the US when it arrived without invitation. Life changed promptly. President Trump declared a national emergency. It officially became a pandemic.

What to expect? This is a war against a virus! World's superpower the United States of America is always ready! Its armory is always full of 21st century high precision arsenals to face any war against it!

However, this time it is totally inert. Instead of soldiers going to the war zone; doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers are at the frontlines to fight the battle with simple protecting gear made up of masks and gloves.

The virus is highly contagious. It takes advantage of possibly every surface to attack the human lungs.

I still remember the firefighters going inside the World Trade Center on 9/11 when it was falling apart. Now I see the heroes of the pandemic; the nurses, the doctors, running into the hospitals — the germ centers — to save the patients, to help them fight against the virus.

This super-rich country, the United States, is helpless; everyday I read about the shortages of masks, gloves, personal protective equipment, and ventilators for its doctors, nurses, and patients. Who knew, suddenly, the number of patients would get so big? This dynamic number keeps on changing every minute. Nobody living today on earth has had this experience (since Spanish Flu of 1918). Nobody, and it seems, no super power is prepared for such an unknown pandemic. The governments around the world make decisions, the whole mankind is under lockdown.

During their daily press conference, Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Deborah Birx have projected a path of number of deaths in the United States (see Figure 1). It is scary. But painfully true. Hope this number to be false. But, as of today, the data is still following the exponential growth predicted mathematically, a surprising fact. This afternoon, the number of death in the United States reported by the Johns Hopkins data portal was 8162. Approximately 30 minutes later it became 8175. It is heartbreaking. By the time I am writing, the number has increased once again.

Last Saturday, I had a very high fever. I am usually a very healthy person; I never reported fever. I remember, Feb 6, 2007, I had a bad flu. I do not recollect having any serious fever since then. In the afternoon of Mar 28, 2020, suddenly I fell sick. Since the Stay-Home order, I have not gone out. I am home, have not even been to the grocery store. Initially, I did not understand. I did not have any symptoms of Corona, no cough, no body ache, no breathing trouble. But we never know, this novel COVID-19 may manifest in any form.

I tried to isolate myself. Asked my son and husband to stay away from me. I insisted even though it is very difficult to quarantine in the same house. Soon the other path seemed to be getting very vivid. How to go for a test? Should / could I drive with such a high fever? I did not want my husband to drive me to infect him. A lot of personal thoughts, a lot of big emotions came one after another, without my permission.

As a child when I was 5-6 yrs old, I was a bit scared. I did not want to be buried alone in my village ghats. I was scared for there would be other ghosts who would scare me if I were alone. My mother would not be there. My family would not be there to protect me from other ghosts. I was holding tight my mother's 'panata kani'. Now, I understand how funny that thought was. Alone, I saw a clear path. I had no fear to become another number.

Whenever I tune in to the TV or news media, I see a dynamic number of death. This is a number, once a name, a member of a family, a father / mother / son / daughter. Now, the person, once full of life, becomes just a number. Once on the hospital bed he cannot see his family for comfort. He is just alone on his death bed till his dying breath. The family cannot give a proper farewell. No funeral, no memorial. No flower. Only isolation, separation with a spring of tears. Just a new coffin with a new number.

April 4, 2020

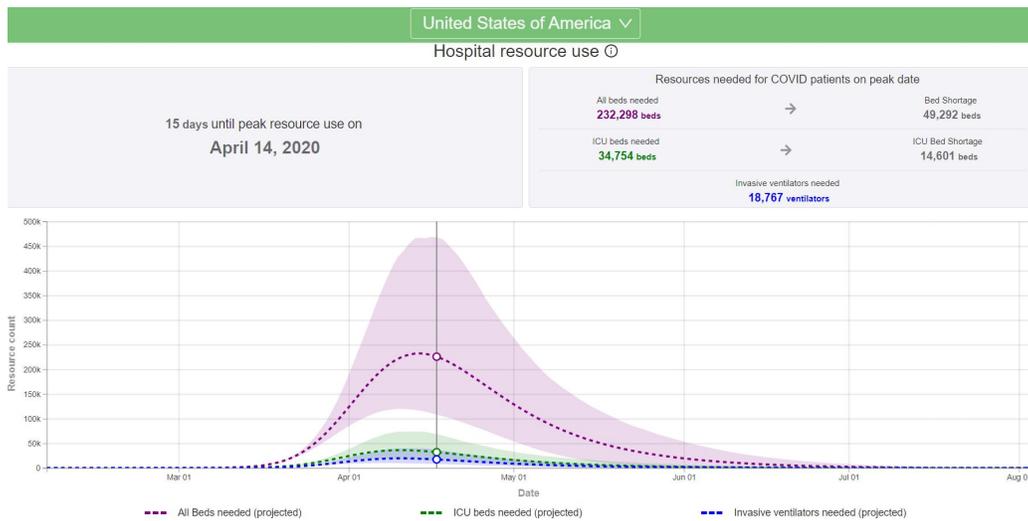


Figure 1: Data and projections can be obtained from The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington (<https://covid19.healthdata.org/projections>) or through the dashboard at the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (accessed through <https://systems.jhu.edu/research/public-health/ncov/>). The image included here is an IHME projection from the end of March 2020, taken from <https://www.policymed.com/2020/03/ihme-creates-covid-19-projection-tool.html> (Thomas Sullivan, “IHME Creates COVID-19 Projection Tool,” *Policy & Medicine*, last updated Mar 29, 2020).