

China's flawed reaction to the coronavirus

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM February 10, 2020



The greatest victims of China's failings are the ordinary Chinese, who bear the heavy brunt of the brutal measures the regime imposes once pandemics are under way, writes Henry Ergas. Picture: Getty Images

When the great cholera epidemics of the 19th century began in 1820, no one had any idea what had struck. Here was a disease of astonishing ferocity, as terrifying as the plague and seemingly as unstoppable, that was rapidly making its way from the Far East towards Europe.

Completely unknown was its aetiology. It would take until 1883 before the German scientist Robert Koch identified the cholera bacillus. Unknown too was whether it was contagious and, if so, how transmission occurred.

Faced with those uncertainties, states naturally adopted a form of Pascal's wager. As a British commentator put it: "To consider it as contagious can do little harm, even should it not be so — but if it be

contagious, not so to consider it must be fatal."

The decision was a wise one. But the methods were often ham-fisted, and nowhere more so than in the great autocracies.

In September 1830, as the epidemic approached Moscow, the roads and bridges leading into the city were destroyed and all those suspected of breaching containment lines were executed on the spot.

A few months later, in Tambov, the Russian police seized anyone thought to be harbouring the disease, beating the recalcitrant senseless.

Prussia's response was more systematic but no less severe. An immense military cordon was drawn along its eastern borders, enforced by 60,000 troops empowered to shoot on sight.

In areas that were infected, or at high risk of infection, a general quarantine was imposed, with no one allowed to leave home except by permission. All places of public assembly were shut and domestic animals were killed.

Prussian officials were given meticulous instructions about how citizens should behave.

Those necessarily in communication with the ill ought to smoke tobacco while in the sick room and take at least one warm bath weekly. Frequent sexual intercourse, which was thought to be a risk factor, was discouraged, as were morbid thoughts. Cabbage, cucumbers and old cheese were to be avoided, especially at night, along with cheap wine.

It would be wrong to think Britain's response was much subtler. Although it had been spared major epidemics since 1665, the statutes aimed at controlling the plague were largely still on the books and once cholera reached the German lands, the Privy Council decided that, should it strike Britain "in a terrific way", troops and police could be used to completely

isolate infected areas.

But Britain did differ from the continental autocracies in being a far more open society.

With a free press — which became even freer as taxes preventing the publication of cheap newspapers were repealed — local authorities had less scope either to bumble or to abuse their power, as they so frequently did on the continent.

At the same time, commercial interests campaigned vigorously against measures they considered needlessly draconian.

Joseph Hume, a Scottish doctor and radical MP, expressed their views well when he told the House of Commons that a blunderbuss approach would “add famine to pestilence, and aggravate tenfold the evils of both”.

Last, but not least, the unrestricted ability to collect data about the disease's incidence encouraged attempts to analyse the conditions which contributed to its spread.

All that facilitated serious investigation of what could be done not merely to immediately control the spread of cholera but also to reduce its longer-term threat.

Placed in charge of the Board of Health, the great Victorian “sanitarians” Edwin Chadwick, Southwood Smith and John Simon ultimately managed to secure parliament's support for measures that sought to provide potable water, ensure effective removal of human and animal waste, and prohibit the sale of adulterated or contaminated food throughout the nation's burgeoning cities.

The sanitarians' program was as costly and intrusive on ordinary people's lives as it was vastly ambitious — indeed, it was more disruptive than any of the policies undertaken by the continent's autocracies.

But Britain's parliament had the public legitimacy to carry out initiatives on that scale, all the more so as a vigilant press helped protect basic freedoms and minimise corruption and inefficiency in the program's implementation.

And, as sanitation improved, public confidence that should disease strike the news would not be suppressed paved the way for a shift from the blunderbuss methods Hume had lamented.

By the last third of the 19th century, when steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal meant that diseases now travelled at unprecedented speed, those initiatives allowed Britain to lead the world in adopting dramatically streamlined controls, reducing the damage an unchecked proliferation of quarantine measures would have done to its dominance of world trade.

Now, history is not a morality tale, dispensing lessons in which virtue triumphs over vice. However, exactly 200 years after the first cholera epidemic began, the parallels are all too apparent.

China's communist leadership may have deployed the most sophisticated forms of surveillance in human history but even truly Orwellian social controls cannot offset the incentives its increasingly authoritarian rule creates for local party bosses to stifle bad news and punish truth-tellers.

Nor can they prevent pervasive cronyism and corruption from undermining its health system and stymieing attempts at regulating markets that have repeatedly acted as breeding grounds for deadly viruses.

By far the greatest victims of those failings are the ordinary Chinese, who bear the heavy brunt of the brutal measures the regime imposes once pandemics are under way.

But the harm obviously extends well beyond China. And the undeniable reality is that China did not respect the responsibilities those global consequences entail.

The International Health Regulations, which are binding on signatory states, are clear: China had an obligation to notify the World Health Organisation of the virus as soon as its first signs appeared, giving other countries as much time as possible to adopt preventive measures.

As the WHO put it in 2007, the "heightened risk of disease outbreaks" caused by shifts in the "delicate balance between humans and microbes", demands of signatories an "immediate alert of disease outbreaks" based on reliable "national systems for detection".

That China instead actively prevented information from being released, and then put pressure on the WHO not to declare an emergency, can only further sap the credibility of its loudly proclaimed commitment to a rules-based international order.

China has enormous achievements to its credit.

But, once again, authoritarianism has proven dangerous to its health — and to the world's.

At the height of its economic power, Britain was a titan, steering the global system away from the European autocracies' grim re-enactments of ancient plagues.

As it pulls us back towards clampdowns, containment lines and isolation wards, China has shown itself to be a giant with feet of clay.