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Commentary: Our focus on COVID risks a resurgence of other diseases

By **Nicole Hassoun**

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I grew up in Denver in the 1980s, and in the park where I would play there was an old abandoned building. One day I asked my mom what it was and she read the sign on the door — it used to be a tuberculosis sanitarium. In my grandparents' time, they would've known all about sanitariums — hoping never to have to visit one themselves.

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Sanitariums were places where people with TB would quarantine themselves so they wouldn't get other people sick and might eventually recover. But many who went to the sanitarium never came home: In the 19th century, TB - the White Plague — caused about a quarter of all the deaths in many parts of the U.S. and Europe.

Biochemist Florence B. Siebert discovered the tuberculosis protein in the 1930s and created diagnostics that eventually helped almost eliminate the disease in the United States and many other developed countries. Thanks to Siebert, TB has largely faded from national memory.

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More than 10 million people around the world still get the disease every year and more than a million die from it. And as we grapple with the coronavirus pandemic,

tuberculosis and other neglected diseases are likely to resurge — even here in the U.S. and in other developed countries.

The [CDC reports](#) that 60-72 percent of TB programs in the U.S. were experiencing a negative impact on staffing, cooperation, financing, clinical services, surveillance, case reporting, training, and outreach — including contract tracing and drug administration.

According to the CDC, “The COVID-19 response is diverting resources from essential TB elimination activities.” They expect to see more cases of TB with fewer people completing treatment and warn of resurging outbreaks of the disease. When TB programs suffered in the late 1980s and early ‘90s, the disease resurged as well, and poor adherence to treatment led to the rise of drug-resistant TB.

As international funding priorities shift to COVID, the effect is likely going to be even worse in poor countries. People around the world are afraid to seek medical care, and it is important to diagnose the disease early. Staff, health services, and supplies have all been redirected to the COVID effort. In some countries, the bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine for TB has been [redirected to health care workers](#), leaving folks who would have otherwise been protected vulnerable.

Other neglected diseases may resurge as well: Shipments of insecticides and bed nets for malaria — another great killer — have been delayed in the pandemic, and mass drug administration campaigns for neglected tropical diseases often rely on teachers — who may not be working now — to distribute medicines. Even the Global Polio Eradication Campaign was put on hold for a while, threatening progress in eliminating the disease. Here in the U.S., a rich, developed country, [vaccination rates fell by 50 percent](#) in March and April, which may lead to a resurgence of many childhood preventable diseases as well.

We face an unprecedented challenge with COVID-19, but its global spread doesn't have to mean neglect of some of the most devastating diseases in history. In fact, allowing that to happen will prolong this public health crisis.

Instead, we should resist efforts to redirect TB vaccines to health care workers, leaving the most vulnerable unprotected. Policymakers should understand that cutting funding for TB and neglected tropical diseases might free up resources to fight COVID-19 in the short term, but that doing so spells a public health nightmare by unleashing the horrors of these diseases once more.

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Florence Siebert had what I call “the virtue of creative resolve”: a fundamental commitment to overcoming seemingly impossible odds. Now we, too, must persist to overcome our own pandemic — but we can't throw the progress of the past by the wayside. A resurgence of TB and other neglected diseases would bring back horrors that we can, and must, avoid.

Nicole Hassoun is a philosophy professor at Binghamton University whose new book, [“Global Health Impact: Extending Access to Essential Medicines,”](#) was just published by Oxford University Press.

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