

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Big Government Is Getting In the Way Of Coronavirus Testing

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After suffering from the initial outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), China appears to have succeeded at turning around its spread through the use of highly coercive measures such as widespread home confinement of both healthy and sick persons. Can societies with more individual liberty match its success without losing their character? South Korea, a more liberal and open country, has enjoyed success at controlling the epidemic with policies that are not nearly as coercive, as [Andrew Salmon at Asia Times](#) and [Josh Rogin at the Washington Post](#) explain. (If you still doubt whether a response to the virus is important for human well-being, check out these links from [Matt Ridley](#), [Megan McArdle](#), and for a deeper statistical dive [Tomas Pueyo](#).)

Crucial to the South Korean approach has been the widespread rollout of testing to a large population, which has caught many instances of community spread that would not have been discovered through contact tracing of known cases, enabled medical intervention and social distancing to begin when they can do most good, and along the way reassured many others that they do not have the illness even though they might be suffering one or two of its symptoms. The Asian nation is now testing about 15,000 persons a day. By contrast, the United States lost valuable weeks when its Centers for Disease Control (CDC) put together a flawed and unusable test kit even as anxious users were prohibited from turning to other tests.

That was just the beginning of the problems on the U.S. side. Testing guidelines were exceedingly narrow, insisting on the presence of risk factors such as international travel, which ended up discouraging the testing of attendees at a Boston conference later linked to 70 cases even after it was noted that attendees were falling sick. And as the [New York Times reported yesterday](#), researchers in the Seattle area had to battle, and eventually work around, regulatory turn-downs that would have permitted investigation of the nation's single largest outbreak. It's an incredible story: "By Feb. 25, Dr. [Helen] Chu and her colleagues could not bear to wait any longer. They began performing coronavirus tests, without government approval." They proceeded to identify the first case of community spread in the Seattle area, a key finding of recent weeks.

The United States still lags countries like South Korea in the availability of drive-up COVID-19 testing, though the first such efforts are launching. (Convenience aside, drive-throughs help keep potentially contagious persons away from doctors' waiting rooms and ERs). Some reported comments suggest that CDC Director Robert Redfield may not be cheering on this trend. But if the feds don't plan to encourage it, we can hope that their regulators will at least stay out of the way so others can provide this service.

When allowed to, the American economy is really good at providing things like convenient testing and doorstep delivery. On another and not unrelated front, Bill Gates is funding an ambitious program to distribute home testing kits to all who want them, starting in Seattle.

I'm feeling glad at the moment that America kept rather than ate its billionaires.

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