



Unvaccinated people dying of Covid doesn't warrant your gloating

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My uncle, who died of Covid-19 last month, was maybe the nicest man in my family, and as I was talking to various people about him while I was preparing to head home to Tennessee for his funeral, each time they would ask: vaccinated or not?

We have moved into a new normal where a person's health status is commonly discussed. Because I'm gay, and there's an HIV epidemic that still rages, I am somewhat used to light discussion of one's health status. But I object to the suggestion that my uncle deserved to die because he chose not to be vaccinated.

However, there are people among us who believe we should go so far as to celebrate the deaths of those who choose against vaccination, especially those who discourage others from choosing the vaccine.

Republican Kelly Ernby, a prominent deputy district attorney in Orange County, California, was well known for railing against Covid-19 vaccine mandates. This month, when 46-year-old Ernby was found dead of Covid complications at her home, not only were there [online celebrations](#), there was even a [column in the Los Angeles Times](#) from columnist Michael Hiltzik who argued that "mockery is not necessarily the wrong reaction to those who publicly mocked anti-COVID measures and encouraged others to follow suit, before they perished of the disease the dangers of which they belittled."

There's a popular subreddit called [r/HermanCainAward](#) — named for the late Republican presidential candidate and friend of Donald Trump who [refused to wear a mask](#) or social distance during the pandemic's early days and died of Covid-19. That subreddit highlights the deaths of people who died while unvaccinated, thereby giving those who are vaccinated the thrill of schadenfreude.

Some people defend the site with the claim that it can help prove to the public that vaccines are the best way to stay alive, but I think they really exist as a way for people to use shame as some sort of weapon to get people vaccinated.

Ben Chapman, the Republican chairman in Costa Mesa, California, tweeted some emails he received that celebrated his friend Ernby's death. "More bigotry and hate coming from the woke big-government mob," he said.

While I typically don't agree with anything Republicans like Chapman say, this time I must.

When I sat masked at my uncle's funeral, I didn't wish harm or death on anybody I saw unmasked or anybody I knew to be unvaccinated — not even those who may be online spreading misinformation about the vaccine. Because in my experience, many of them — due to the various mechanisms at play, from social media that allows misinformation to go unchecked to a culmination of distrust of the government hitting a boiling point — are not moved even by death anymore.

As is the case with some people, especially in my family, when and if they survive Covid despite being unvaccinated, they come out even more strong-willed.

"I don't believe fear tactics are ever a solution to the problem of information sharing," my friend Dr. Darien Sutton, an emergency room physician and ABC News medical contributor, recently wrote on his Instagram after his unvaccinated aunt died. Sutton, who gave me permission to quote him here, even went further by noting that, similar to many members in my family, many Black Americans (and most disenfranchised groups in this country) find themselves scared of the vaccine because of a vast history of ways that science has been used to harm marginalized people.

"If it can impact me, a physician and public health professional, it can also impact the people who you love and care about," he wrote.

When the pandemic will end is no longer a productive conversation. As we face yet another spike, we should move toward a mindset that acknowledges that Covid may never go away fully but, like other viruses before it, including the flu, will become an endemic threat.

That mindset would prompt us to look at harm-reduction models, such as those developed to assist people who are addicted to drugs. That model acknowledges that telling people they'll die if they don't stop using drugs doesn't work; telling them they'll die if they aren't vaccinated doesn't work, either.

"Blanket one-size-fits-all mandates on human movement, behavior, economic activity, social, and educational arrangements have not 'defeated' the virus," Dr. Jeffrey A. Singer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, recently wrote. "They often involve tradeoffs with harms greater than any benefits brought in terms of reduced risk."OCT. 27, 202101:39

He went on to suggest a multipronged model that promotes immunization but also ensures people have access to masks, are able distance from others and take time off from work and school.

People are complicated and contradictory and often need time to decide to do the right thing. Some of them, like the members of my family and Sutton's family who have died, die before they have enough time to figure it out.

But for us to get to a place where we could even implement something like this as public policy, we'd need to agree on one thing: No one deserves to die. If we can't agree on this, then we are doomed. The treatment of HIV-positive people in the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan is a poignant example of the tragedy that results when we employ shame and stigma and make calculations about who should live and die.

No matter where one stands on the politics of vaccines or Trump or whatever other topic that has our country polarized, the deaths of unvaccinated people will not bring relief. People dying in droves never does.