



Simple measures

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New Zealand has been at level one for a few weeks now and so there is time to reflect on the experience of the past six months dealing with COVID-19.

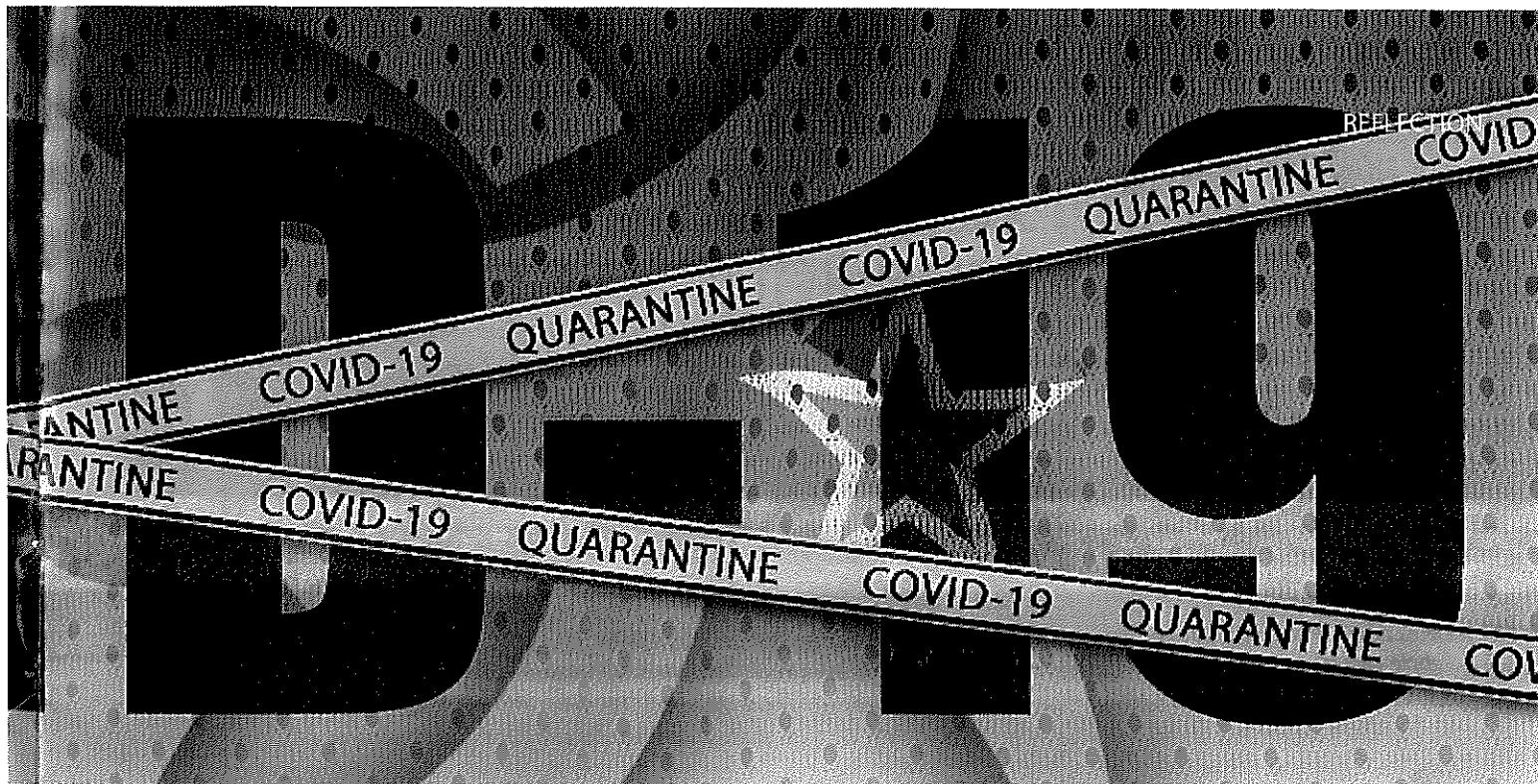
News of an outbreak of a new virus in Wuhan, China, first came to our attention in January. My initial reaction was one of fear. We discovered quickly that it was highly contagious. We witnessed day by day the rise in the number of cases and deaths as it spread rapidly around the world and eventually reached us here in February. We had no cure, vaccine or any known immunity and best predictions said that it would take at least a year for a vaccine to be developed. There were difficulties getting good protective equipment for front line people and finding good tests for the presence of the virus. There were fears that the health systems in many countries would be unable to cope.

I was monitoring the situation in Ireland, my home country, where the Prime Minister suggested at an early stage that as many as 85,000 people might die there. Memories of the Spanish Flu in 1918, which caused 50 million deaths, suggested that this scale was possible. Being over 70 and with a long-term respiratory condition, I can recall one evening thinking that if I caught this disease it would probably kill me. There were many good reasons for fear as we faced a deadly disease seemingly without any defences against it.

However, we discovered that there were very basic things we could do and we have heard them repeated over and over again so that they will remain an indelible part of our memory of these past months: stay home and isolate yourself to help break the chain of transmission and flatten the curve, wash your hands carefully and often, do not touch your face, cough into your elbow and maintain a safe social distance from others if you do have to go out.

There are echoes here of the story of Naaman found in *2 Kings 5: 1-19*. He was the Syrian army commander who suffered from leprosy – a disease also associated with isolation from family and community. A young Hebrew servant girl told him to go to the prophet in Samaria and he would find help. His arrival almost caused a political crisis as, until Elisha explained the situation, the King of Israel thought he was being provoked into a war with Syria. When Naaman did go to Elisha, the prophet did not come out to meet him but sent a message: *"Go to the river Jordan and wash seven times."* Naaman was angry that Elisha had not come personally to see him, had not prayed to his God, had not touched the infected area or made any significant intervention to bring healing.

If he did have to wash were not the rivers of Damascus just as good? His servants said to him: *"If the prophet had asked*



you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How easy it is to take a bath as the prophet has ordered you to do." He followed this instruction and was healed.

The good news is that these simple measures worked. As of July 7, 2020, New Zealand has had 1,536 cases and 22 deaths. In Ireland there have been 25,531 cases and 1,741 deaths. While behind these figures there are many tragic stories, they are far less than the numbers initially feared. Other countries have not yet reached their peak and the number of cases and deaths worldwide continues to rise, now over 10 million with more than 500,000 deaths. A second wave is still possible and there are signs that it is already happening as countries seek to come out of lockdown. So, while fear has not completely evaporated, we have been reassured by the way these simple measures worked to stem the spread of coronavirus and by the willingness of so many people to stick faithfully to them. Some of these, like hand washing, were easy, but others, like self-isolating, have had a high economic and social cost. The fear many people felt provided the impetus needed to do what we could in the absence of a vaccine or cure and give us more time for them to be found.

It is interesting in the Naaman story that simple measures to deal with his leprosy were suggested by his servants:

"Go to see the prophet and wash as commanded." These past months we have come to appreciate the role played by doctors, nurses, medical experts and political leaders in containing the virus and also people whose jobs are not highly regarded like cleaners, supermarket employees and waste management people. Our level of fear was reduced by seeing many heart-warming stories from around the world that revealed the basic goodness and creativity of ordinary people. Hopefully, the abiding message that we will continue to carry forward is: *"Be kind!"*

It also seems that our planet is saying something to us about the way we behave towards each other and towards our Earth, our home. With few people travelling during lockdown, the Earth has got a chance to breathe as pollution levels dropped dramatically. There are real and genuine fears about the damage we are doing to our planet and to ourselves. We need to change. We cannot just go back to how things were before COVID-19. It has taught us that small measures, when embraced by a high proportion of the population, can make a big difference.

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