



Covid-19: Trump declares intention to “re-open economy” within weeks against experts’ advice

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President Donald Trump, growing increasingly impatient with social distancing measures urged by US public health officials, has said that he wants people back at work and “packed churches all over the country” by Easter Sunday, 12 April.

“It’s such an important day for other reasons, but I’ll make it an important day for this, too,” he told Fox News on 24 March. “I would love to have the country opened up and just raring to go by Easter.” Trump tweeted on 22 March: “We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself,” echoing a phrase heard earlier that day on Fox News.

The president’s rapid divergence of opinion from his expert advisers seemed to be confirmed by the temporary disappearance from the daily briefing of Anthony Fauci, the immunologist who has been the administration’s most credible voice on covid-19. Fauci, 79, has been director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for 40 years, but the pandemic has made him a household name.

He has corrected Trump on several occasions during the briefings, most recently when the president touted chloroquine as a “game changer.” Trump’s claims sparked a run on the drug, which has left patients with lupus and rheumatoid arthritis unable to fill their prescriptions. A man in Arizona died and his wife is in critical condition after they self-medicated with a form of chloroquine used to clean fish tanks.

Fauci made some of his most candid comments yet in an interview with *Science* magazine on 22 March, saying that Trump’s public advice was “expressed in a way that I would not express it, because it could lead to some misunderstanding.”¹

Fauci missed the next two briefings but returned to the podium on 24 March, after reporters had questioned his absence.

Trump demurred, however, when asked to commit to following his health advisers’ recommendations. “If it was up to the doctors, they might say shut down the entire world,” he said. Asked if Fauci agreed with his plan to re-open the economy, Trump said: “He doesn’t not agree.”

Many voices in Trump’s party dispute the need for strong measures to contain the disease, arguing that the health costs of a deep recession could outweigh those of widespread coronavirus infection. Trump told Fox News on 24 March: “You look at automobile accidents, which are far greater than any numbers we’re talking about. That doesn’t mean we’re going to tell everybody no driving.”

The country loses about 37 000 people a year on the roads, but models of unrestrained spread of covid-19 project deaths in the low millions.² “You can’t compare this to 1918,” Trump went on. “That was a flu where if you got it, you had a 50-50 chance or very close of dying.” The great pandemic’s actual fatality rate was 2.5%.

1 Cohen J. ‘I’m going to keep pushing.’ Anthony Fauci tries to make the White House listen to facts of the pandemic. *Science* 2020;22https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/i-m-going-keep-pushing-anthony-fauci-tries-make-white-house-listen-facts-pandemic10.1126/science.abb8295.

2 Ferguson NM, Laydon D, Nedjati-Gilani G, et al. Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to reduce COVID19 mortality and healthcare demand. 16 Mar 2020. https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-NPI-modelling-16-03-2020.pdf

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