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Covid-19: One Year On

**When did Covid-19 appear on your ministry's radar?**

We have the public health emergency response team; they meet regularly just dealing with public health issues, particularly pandemics and the like. They started meeting in earnest in January, when we became aware of this particular disease floating around Southeast Asia. They were meeting regularly then. We started following this in January.

My first press conference was in February, when the *Anthem of the Seas* was arriving, and Bermudians became more aware of the coronavirus as it was called then. Because of the news, we obviously started looking more carefully and realising this was likely to impact Bermuda, particularly because of us being an international jurisdiction. We were seeing cases popping up outside of Southeast Asia, America in particular. We realised it's just a matter of course where it would probably hit our shores.

Influenza was our main concern. That was our last pandemic [in 2009], with H1N1. We had a really bad influenza the year before that. Our concern was trying to lobby and encourage everybody to get a flu vaccine and, of course, stay home if you were unwell. The first few months of the year is when we see more influenza.

The PHERT team meets regularly. They started meeting in earnest, far more regularly, around mid-January, when more information was coming through Public Health England and other sources, that there was this disease – we've always had a pandemic response policy manual here at the Ministry in any event, because we've had other pandemics. They were meeting regularly, following information coming out of Southeast Asia, and making sure we were adhering to the pandemic response policies.

**When did you start thinking it would inevitably get here?**

I think mid to late February, when we recognised there was a cruise ship coming, and there were reports of that same vessel having persons that were positive for coronavirus on it the previous sailing week. It emphasised the fact that Bermuda is probably not going to be spared this. Because we're an international jurisdiction, not only with travel but with residents coming back and forth because of work commitments, that it was inevitable it would be here.

We were probably in a wait-and-see like everybody else was. It was something new, and nobody knew exactly how it was going to materialise. Initially there was all this discussion, and the science seemed to support that it was transmitted by droplets; then it was aerosol – it just evolved. As more people got sick and the science became more developed, and there was more evidence, things changed. We were following it closely; we have an epidemiology and surveillance team here at the ministry and that's what they do. Before I got to the ministry I had no idea what an epidemiologist was. That's not something familiar to me until I got here, and certainly over the last year and a half.

**Was there any point you had qualms for relatives or colleagues, on a personal level?**

Probably around March, when we started seeing more cases in the United States. And then, early mid-March when Cabinet started meeting to discuss what our plan was going to be with respect to trying to mitigate against it and prevent its entry into Bermuda. By the 18<sup>th</sup>, that's our first case, imported of course; it went really fast.

**Tell us about weighing up that decision to close the borders.**

Every decision that we made was a balancing act. And we had to make calls based on the information we had at the time. To close the airport, we knew, would adversely affect the economy, very, very drastically. Again, it was evolving. Every 24 hours there were new changes, new information, new evidence revealed concerning coronavirus. In addition to having to strike that balance, it was also about recognising there was an economic balance but also recognising the cost to life in respect of illness and the like. Once a decision was made, recognising the impact it was having in New York, probably our number one gateway, we moved very, very quickly to say, right, we're going to have to take steps to close the borders. And that's what we did.

**What was that process like? What was the atmosphere like in Cabinet as you grappled with that decision? There are people who are going to say you should have done it before, and people saying it shouldn't be done.**

Or don't do it right now. Exactly; you're right. I remember we had an emergency Cabinet meeting on a Sunday, quite a lengthy meeting. Of course, the Premier asked for me to provide what our position was according to a public health perspective. There was a lot of discussion, but we were pretty much in unison insofar as the drastic action we needed to take. We all went around and discussed it, the pros and the cons. At the end of the day, there was a consensus we needed to close. By then, we had already started, within the Ministry, working 12, 14 hour days. I remember I was dressed very casually. I came back to the office and started typing up what needed to be done, the next steps.

I'm normally the one who makes the travel arrangements for my children. My daughter was at university in Canada; my son was in boarding school in Buffalo. I'm still working ... and I remember it like it was yesterday. I'm sitting here at my desk. I knew it was only a matter of days before the airport was going to be closed. I picked up my phone, called my husband, and said, you know what, let me just make the travel arrangements. I paused, grabbed my credit card, and made the reservations.

I called my daughter and said, you're not going to have any time to pack. You're coming home tomorrow. I helped her, because she had never taken a bus to Toronto. My son came back the next day; she came home on a Monday, he came home on a Tuesday. Just trying to get them home. Then I went back to work. Like I said, we were working long hours then. It just continued. It was kind of surreal; we knew at that point there would be drastic changes. People's lives would be affected economically, emotionally, physically. This was the real deal.

**We started to know more about asymptomatic carriers. Were you thinking at that point there could be people on the island that have this, and have no idea they're carrying it?**

Yes. Again, this is based on the support that we have through the Chief Medical Officer, Cheryl Peek-Ball at the time, and the epidemiologists: we knew the virus could be transmitted by persons that had no symptoms. We knew that. So the fact that two persons were imported, and were detected – the more you test, the more you find out. At that point, we didn't have the capabilities to do on-island testing. But we knew if there were two, there were more than two. The reality is there was such a high percentage of persons that could have the virus but no symptoms, asymptomatic spreaders, then we knew it was likely we had more episodes than we were aware of.

**Worst-case scenarios involved hundreds of deaths. We lost 12 people. At the time, would you have dreamed things would have turned out this way?**

No. Our initial modelling that was conducted, based on our age demographics ... it was looking very, very grim. Notwithstanding we have lost 12 lives, but the modelling initially looked very, very grim, which supported closing the borders and moving to the drastic measures we did take with respect to the shelter-in-place, which was very, very unpopular. Closing the borders and moving to shelter-in-place as quickly as we did helped minimise the spread, because we didn't have people in groups. I think that's what helped spare us.

**Did you get flak out in public?**

It was mixed. I would see the grocery lines on Church Street right here from my office. If I happened to run over there – we continued to work; even though we had shelter-in-place the Ministry never closed – if we went over there to get lunch, we heard comments. We got e-mails from people asking why we were doing this. Equally, there were people saying, We get it. They were watching what was happening in the world and other jurisdictions; it was very frightening. They said, if you want me to stay at home, I'm going to stay home.

**You and your team remained confident in the decisions you had made?**

Absolutely.

**April was the worst month, with the cases in rest homes, six deaths. Was that as bad as it got?**

I think April was probably ... again, coupled with probably all of us on average working 14, 15 hours a day; days went into nights – some days we didn't know what day it was. April was a really, really intense month. On Mother's Day I made a point of just trying to take a couple of hours off. We were working seven days a week. I took a little time off to be with my kids, who had been home since months. I remember that was my first Sunday afternoon where I wasn't working. The rest of the women, mothers too, said we needed a break.

**There were some shortages initially of swabs for testing. When we were struggling for material, what was that like?**

I think overall, Bermuda fared really well with respect to procurement of PPE. There were challenges. I teased one woman who was in charge of helping to procure PPE, working with the hospital – we immediately started a relationship with BHB, who were used to procuring in bulk; we didn't have that. It was for the nursing homes, doctors' offices that didn't have sufficient supply; frontline workers, Ministry of Health workers, fire, police, everybody. We secured it for the whole island. I walked into her office so many times and you'd hear thick Chinese accents. I said, you're going to know Mandarin by the time this is over. She was constantly negotiating, having to be up at certain hours. And we did have challenges getting it. We knew we needed to, because we were seeing shortages. We were looking at every source, everywhere on the globe. That question kept coming up; we'd get asked every week about it.

Remember Trump said no more N95s exported? We had supplies that were already ordered and procured, and those were stopped. We had a container that Congressman Butterfield helped us secure, to get that back to Bermuda. We'd already purchased the supplies. We were negotiating with one company in China for further supplies and it got to the border with Hong Kong, where it was a week's holiday for Labour Day. You have no idea. This team is great.

### **How was it constantly dealing with the press?**

At times, and it still exists, it's frustrating. I recognise the press have a role to inform the public. I get it. But when so many of the questions are asked over and over – especially when we started it, it was five days a week. We've only just gone, after a year, to every other week.

I think it was important; it kept the public informed. It created a sense of comfort, knowing that what we know, you know, and we've just disseminated it to you.

### **Shelter-in-place as a decision revolved around making sure the hospital wasn't overwhelmed?**

Absolutely. Not to overwhelm our healthcare system. The hospital was able to secure through private donors further ventilators; they added further floors, and negative pressure rooms. They were able to upscale and prepare for the worst-case scenario. The most they had at any time, I think, was 16. However, having said that, recognising that we couldn't afford to have our only hospital overrun, that was a major factor in our decision. If our hospital was overrun, it would have been horribly problematic.

### **Was there a thought in Government to only shelter the vulnerable and avoid lockdown?**

I think on a small scale. They were looking at some Scandinavian countries – Sweden. But most people recognised this was for the best. Remember, we have such an older population versus some of the other countries and states that didn't necessarily adhere to that, but they had a younger population. We had an older, more chronically ill population that we needed to protect.

We made decisive decisions. It was all based on the evidence at the time, and we acted on it and moved ahead.

**We were doing well. November we had a spike; lately we've had more infections around parties. Were you expecting some of this to happen? Was it frustrating?**

I find it extremely frustrating and painful. Particularly when I know the long hours that the ministry, the Regiment, the police, the hospital, frontline workers, and the sacrifices made to the disadvantage of our families, for some extremely selfish, inconsiderate individuals to think that their life can carry on, completely ignoring the public health provisions and the sacrifices everybody else has made to get us to the position that we are at, which we are doing very, very well.

We've always had our lead and lag measures. We've always operated by a set of criteria, by red, gold and green. What's your level of PPE, hospitalisations. We had the lead measures and the lag measures. We were constantly watching that. When we saw some of our lag measures were starting to get into amber, then we knew it's time to close the tap, so to speak. Those are factors we were conscious of when making decisions, as well as making recommendations to the Cabinet insofar as rolling back some of the restrictions.

We saw in other jurisdictions it was the younger people who were not necessarily adhering to the public health guidelines.

**How lucky were we?**

I don't want to say luck. Because we had such an aggressive testing regime. You land here, you're going to get tested, and you're going to get tested on day four and day 14 – because we had that aggressive testing we were able to monitor the borders. The only way Covid could get in was through the borders. Because we were testing everybody that came in, it allowed us to minimise the impact of Covid and the transmission, because we were testing at the borders.

**How has this year of dealing with this changed your life and your ministry?**

I'm sure everybody has suffered through Covid. This last year has been difficult and a strain on every single individual. I'm saddened by people that lost loved ones over this past year – not just to Covid, but who couldn't properly bury them. Persons that didn't get to participate in a graduation, birthdays, christenings. It has impacted us all.

Personally, it has been the worst year of my professional and political life. I have never felt so physically and emotionally and mentally drained in all my life. I remember one day, the secretary – I parked right out here, especially when we were the only ones in town. She called me and said, Minister – she could see my car there – and I was just bawling. I was like a child. I don't want to go to work today. I really don't want to go to the office. She said, I see you're out there ...

I don't even know how to describe it. I don't know. And it hasn't changed. It's a little bit lessened, but now there's more the impact with the vaccinations, making sure we do the vaccinations.

**Will you heave a sigh of relief when we hit that 70 per cent?**

That would certainly make me happy, and make all of us happy, when we can get herd immunity. If we could get everybody vaccinated, get herd immunity, we could kind of have a semblance of a summer. We're always, at this point, be required to wear masks, wash our hands – there's going to be certain degrees of restrictions, but knowing we have herd immunity will allow us to have some degree of normality. Just imagine. We could go on a boat this summer!

**How has this altered your perception of the future? Are you better prepared, or is there more trepidation over emerging possibilities?**

Of other pandemics? Well, we've dealt with other pandemics before. Certainly not at this level. We jokingly say we're the Ministry of Covid; we don't even call ourselves the Ministry of Health any more.

I cannot understate the fact that the team at this ministry really, really are tremendous. These guys are the most professional, hard-working, committed individuals that I've ever worked with. I mentioned the other day at the BPSU, if we were at the Battle of Covid, I wouldn't want to be in war with anybody else except this team. They really, really are stellar. Each and every one of them performed above and beyond what was expected of them.