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Covid-19: the humanities and social sciences have much to contribute to beating this pandemic and the next

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The potential for the humanities and social sciences to contribute greatly to tackling covid-19 merits consideration.¹ This could be where the most important academic advances arise, as better understanding of human and societal behaviour is essential if robust strategies to maximise human safety are to be identified and implemented effectively.^{2,3,4}

Phenomena such as the behavioural psychology around variations in people's desire to embrace risk taking,⁵ the growth of vaccine denial,⁶ and the organised "fight back" against the wearing of face masks⁷ demand attention. Researching the reasons behind emerging claims that the covid-19 virus is not a serious threat to health is also important.⁸ Better understanding of behavioural phenomena of this sort is needed to limit further dissemination of the disease. Emergent zoonoses are undoubtedly a serious threat to human life,⁹ so we need to better understand the key drivers behind the international (and often illegal) trade in rare animal species to formulate realistic preventive action.

Prevention is always better than cure, and it is essential that vital public health medicine and epidemiology resources are properly funded.² That said, it is the study of politics, economics, and ethics⁴ that helps us acquire the understanding we need of the differing responses of different countries—and their governing authorities—to security threats, which in turn will allow us to formulate more effective international responses.

Accordingly, we should rethink where academic attention and resources would best be focused. Moreover, as everyone looks apprehensively towards the future, minds should be concentrated on anticipating—and planning—for the likely emergence of other, potentially lethal, infectious successors to covid-19 and predicting how they might behave and spread in societies.

Footnotes

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