Advice on face masks

In response to a question about masks on the Dr. Oz show, Lipkin said: "Well...ah..the...the really ...ah ... the messaging that you're getting from WHO, CDC, and others suggests that... masks are not useful."[46] As Director of the Northeast Biodefense Center and the WHO Collaborating Center, Lipkin headed a key WHO advisory body.[47] Lipkin added that masks should be left for healthcare professionals and "emphasized" that the virus was less dangerous than the flu.[48] He was not wearing a mask or practicing social distancing whilst on the show. At the time, Lipkin was aware of what he calls a “compelling” 2003 WHO study “that showed that face masks... had a dramatic impact on community transmission”.[49] Lipkin said “I thought a long time about trying to publish this (but) I didn’t proceed - so that’s something that unfortunately is going to go in the memoirs rather than the written record.”[50]

Lipkin also related a conversation with a colleague in early-mid Feb 2020 who was conducting modelling that showed a spike in infections was likely to hit New York. “One of these people doing the modelling said ‘But you know, all we need to do is put people into facemasks and everybody can go back to work tomorrow.' I said ‘Absolutely not! That’s crazy!' First of all most people don’t know how to use facemasks... and secondly - uhm - we don’t really have any data to support that.” [51] However, there was ample data that showed masks do provide cheap, effective protection against the virus,[52][53][54][55][56][57][58] including a hospital-based study during the 2003 SARS outbreak which found, "Wearing a mask can give a person dealing with SARS patients up to 13 times more protection compared with not wearing one."[52] Furthermore, George Gao, director-general of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, who Lipkin met with on his China trip and described as a “trusted”,[59] friend, contradicted Lipkin’s advice. In an interview with *Science*, Gao said *not* advising the public to wear masks in the U.S at the beginning of the outbreak was a “big mistake”.[60]

As an alternative to masks, Lipkin promoted a video he’d provided advice for,[61] involving the lead actors from *Contagion*, which urged people to “shelter in place”, "wash your hands", and “listen to the experts”.[62]

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