

Podcast Transcript

Coronavirus - What Catholics need to know about COVID-19

Interview with Professor Jim McManus

Interviewer

Hello and welcome to our Catholic News podcast. I'm in the rather interesting surroundings of Hertfordshire County Council. I'm here speaking to Jim McManus, the director of public health for Hertfordshire and the vice president of the Association of Directors of Public Health. Jim is also part of our Healthcare Reference Group and has been for many years helping us out with all matters concerned with healthcare.

Jim, I think there's only one matter, certainly in the public consciousness, when it comes to healthcare at the moment – Coronavirus. But I should be a bit more specific because it's a family of viruses - COVID-19. Now, you've helped us with the excellent guidelines that we have. We're currently at Stage 2. We hear health officials saying that potentially 10,000 people in the UK could have COVID-19.

I noticed a key message in the guidelines is reassurance. What do we do at this point to reassure people and perhaps get away from a hysterical reaction?

Jim McManus

Well, I think that's probably the best thing, because we've got two epidemics. One is the virus and the other is fear and panic. I keep saying that to people – reassuring them that 81% of people who get this virus will have fairly mild disease – a bit like a bad flu. 14% will be fairly severe and only about 5% will be critical. And we expect less than 2% to die. And that is the case.

People are behaving as if it's much worse. They're behaving as if they need to panic buy. There are plenty of supplies in the shops of all the food. The supermarkets are working flat out. And we're in the 'delay phase', which means we're just trying to slow the peak of the epidemic because we can't stop it altogether. So we will come through this. We will come out the other end and we will all still be together. It's not as bad as people are fearing.

Interviewer

Are we right to think that our healthcare system here in England and Wales is robust enough to cope with this?

Jim McManus

Yes – provided that we all protect ourselves and the most vulnerable. So there is a key thing here about the phases of pandemics. We've moved from 'containment', which is trying to stop it spreading, into 'delay', which is trying to slow the spread and slow the peak. And there are two reasons for slowing the spread in the peak. And they both relate to the most vulnerable people because the most vulnerable people will get most ill from this. So the first reason for slowing the peak is that we don't want to overwhelm the healthcare system at a time when it needs to care for those who are most vulnerable.

And the second reason for slowing the peak is to ensure the health and social care system will be much more able to cope with the demand and care for our vulnerable people. So as a society right now, we have to stop worrying about ourselves. The people who sometimes make the most noise, for instance parents worried about their children, are, unless the children have severe immune problems and severe underlying conditions, the people who are at the very *least* risk. We have to focus on those at *most* risk – the most vulnerable – and stop the virus getting to them.

Interviewer

And it occurs to me actually with something moving very fast like this that I should say this is the 13 March, Friday, and we're in the early afternoon here. It's funny, isn't it? I rarely have to do a podcast where I need to put a time marker on it, but this thing's moving quickly, isn't it?

Jim McManus

It is. I mean, the case definitions have moved in just the last two days – twice. So the case definition is now we're no longer going to test you if you've got a continuous dry cough *and* a fever, self-isolate for seven days, and we're now assuming it's on the basis of symptoms. So that's a big change. We will probably see more measures come out in the next three to four weeks as we ramp in. Things like large scale meetings may need to change, but there's no point doing that too early because actually if you do it too early, people get tired of the measures – they disrupt them – and it may not have the right effect. So things move very fast in a way that they didn't actually quite in 2009 during swine flu.

Interviewer

Now, sometimes people say we live in too sterile a society. I've heard that before. I've had friends who are doctors pick things off the floor and eat them if they haven't been on the floor

too long. But that said, in this particular phase, using hand gels, if we can literally lay our hands on them, certainly washing with soap and water for 20 seconds. You and I are sitting two metres apart, which is recommended as well and we'll come on to self-isolation. You know, we see this as a bad thing but some of these habits are decent hygienic habits to get into anyway, aren't they?

Jim McManus

Absolutely. And we've become far too complacent around colds and flu. One thing we need to remember is that every year in England, every day during the flu season, a person dies of flu and we've become complacent about it. And one of the things that will hinder us with this virus is we're so complacent about hygiene. And I think there's a difference between what most public health people call 'the 30-second rule' from the floor, or 10 second rule if you're really cautious, mostly aimed at bacteria, and viruses against which we have no immunity – and we have no immunity against this thing – and we won't develop immunity until it's been circulating for at least a year and infecting people. So your only weapon is good hygiene and social distancing. There isn't any hope of a vaccine any time before late summer at the very earliest.

Interviewer

Now, I was in Ireland last week and I know the Irish schools have obviously suspended kids from going to school. Let's talk about the Catholic community over here, because over there they were saying there's a dispensation not to go to Mass if you're unwell. And obviously, we would say if you're unwell, you know, you have to be careful who you're around in public, naturally. Talk us through Stage 2 of the guidelines you've put together for us, in terms of what we do, particularly at Mass, and when we gather as Catholics.

Jim McManus

So we have these guidelines on the Bishops' Conference website, as you say, and they're aimed to ensure that we disrupt and delay the spread of the virus in our community. And they're also aimed at Stage 2, ensuring that Mass can happen as safely as possible for as many people as possible. So we are not *yet* saying to people we're suspending Masses. So it's things like no physical sign of peace, communion in the hand only, not communion on the tongue, not receiving from the chalice. Removing the Holy Water stoups, public veneration of relics and the Cross on Good Friday not by kissing or physically touching and actually advising the most vulnerable to think about staying away, but not everybody, because they will have a dispensation. But even things like ceasing use of hymn books.

This is all designed around one thing which is stopping the virus circulating during the Mass to the people. So if everybody washes their hands, or uses hand gel as a second best, when they

come in and does it *thoroughly* for twenty seconds – and you can find videos on how you do that, there's a link on the Bishops' Conference website to the video. You follow these guidelines. They are designed to stop the virus transmitting during Mass so that Mass can happen safely because it's important. And that's what Stage 2 is about.

We've all got a responsibility – because actually I'm more at risk having had cancer and still having a weakened immune system, but I'm not more at-risk than my mother, who's 81 and has got diabetes and heart disease. She's much more at risk. So these guidelines are designed to protect the people who really matter and are most precious to Catholics, which is the vulnerable.

Interviewer

And taking a few mini examples. I suppose they are on my mind because I have heard my children say such things – “grandma shouldn't get on the Tube”. Some two million people pass through the Underground network every day. I mean, I appreciate that. But some people don't have a choice, do they? When it comes to transportation and getting around the place.

Jim McManus

Yeah. I think social distancing is a really good thing if you can do it. Staying two metres away from people. I coughed on a train into London the other day and I had four seats to myself within about two seconds. And I've also noticed people are being polite to one another. So, you know, we may be at risk of recovering our common duty to one another as humans. But if you have to travel, wash your hands before you go out. Stay away from anyone coughing and sneezing. Touch as few surfaces as you can. Do not put your hands above your shoulders. Now, why am I saying that? Because we keep saying, don't touch your mouth, your eyes or your nose or your face. I see that is quite difficult. But keeping your hands below your shoulders is a lot easier. And if you do that, you're much less likely to touch your face. So there's a bit of behavioural psychology in there. You know, if you just do that and then wash your hands as soon as you can and obviously sneeze into a tissue and bin it. And if you do those things, I think that's about as much as you can do to protect yourself.

Plus, we also know that public transport, certainly here in Hertfordshire, have stepped up the cleaning regimes. And shortly we will have posters on every train going to Hertfordshire, and every bus to Hertfordshire talking about those measures. So if you have to travel by public transport, there are things you can do.

Interviewer

And what I find quite heartening actually is, you know, we hear on a level that there's no hand sanitisers available. It's really hard to get these things. But you come into public places like I

have today, and there's plenty of it really, which is a good sign. And I've noticed that in hospitals, obviously, too. So perhaps it's worth saying that, in a lot of public places, there will be cleaning facilities available...

Jim McManus

Yes. And so I was at a meeting in another public building in Hertfordshire on Tuesday night talking about Coronavirus. And, you know, the soap was plentiful. There was hand sanitiser in the public areas. There were wipes. So you were actually encouraged to wipe the desk that you'd been at after you left it for the meeting, which is an extra added touch, I think. But they have a lot of very vulnerable people in the building. They're taking extra precautions. So the stuff is there. You don't need to panic by it. And actually, if all you're doing is sanitising your hands with stuff you buy from supermarkets and not washing your hands, you're not covering yourself as much. Hand sanitiser is an *addition* to washing your hands – not a substitute unless you *can't* get to soap and water.

Interviewer

So I think people are behaving in this way thinking “It's ok because I've got some hand sanitiser...”

Jim McManus

Yeah. I mean, I always say wash your hands before you leave the house. When you get to work, before you have a break, before you have lunch, after you have lunch. And when you get home. Use hand sanitiser between those times – that's the safest thing. I did pass a guy the other evening who was smoking a cigarette while wearing a face mask and using hand sanitiser. So I stopped and said, “Do you realise that's probably worse because you're touching the face mask, then touching the cigarette and actually getting it into your mouth really, really effectively.

Interviewer

It's like you said, behavioural habits.

Jim McManus

It really is.

Interviewer

Yeah. Couple of quick bits. A bit of myth busting before we move onto self-isolation. First one. Washing your hands with cold water. Any difference to washing with hot?

Jim McManus

Hot is much preferable because you get the temperature up. The soap works much better. And it can actually really penetrate the virus protein rings and kill them. But you know, any water is better than no water.

Interviewer

Wash for 20 seconds – keep that amount of time.

Jim McManus

20 seconds. You can do the video. Actually, there's a video of Aretha Franklin singing 'I will survive' for washing hands.

Interviewer

I've seen a 'Salve Regina', which apparently works.

Jim McManus

I haven't seen that.

Interviewer

Second bit of myth busting. If I sneeze, I don't have Coronavirus. I've heard that one.

Jim McManus

No, that's nonsense. Because Coronavirus can have any cold symptoms and any flu symptoms. Obviously sneezing can be anything, but it can also be Coronavirus. The cough and the fever are the two most frequent symptoms at the minute.

Interviewer

That's good cause I'm moving on to symptoms because they can be quite difficult to identify, can't they? I think people struggle. I've coughed once or twice. Do I have Corona? Do I need to self-isolate? So in terms of self-isolation and symptoms, what's a reasonable assessment of how we should look at it?

Jim McManus

If you have a *new* symptom and it wasn't around before - dry and continuous cough – like I mean *frequently*. So my voice is suffering at the moment from all the speaking I've been doing. So I coughed when we came in. But you know, I haven't coughed since. So if I had Coronavirus, I'd be coughing fairly repeatedly. So that, plus a fever. And I don't mean you are feeling a wee bit warm, I mean a genuine fever. We know when we've got a fever, don't we? Do you feel feverish and unwell? Those two together, that is a sign that you should self-isolate. It can be all sorts of things. And my worry is that in people who are really vulnerable – things like lung disease and heart disease – these symptoms may be masked.

So it's all the more important that we make sure they get the bulk of medical resource. Because if you've got heart failure or COPD and coughing all the time, it would be relatively easy for a very over-worked nurse to miss the Coronavirus cough, which is just a cough, but it's a *continuous* cough on top of your other things.

Interviewer

That's a really interesting point. You've mentioned vulnerable people, and I think that brings us back to that. You look at the statistics, you know, the age brackets in decades. Most suggest 0.4% may end up dying compared to if you're over 80, some 13-14%. I'm not saying these are very accurate but you can see the jump – especially if you've got an underlying health condition... I detect from some more elderly people that it's quite sad people are saying "Oh, don't worry, you're young, so even if you get it, you're going to be alright. It's the elderly." But it's a team effort, isn't it? We should be thinking about our hygiene to protect the older people shouldn't we?

Jim McManus

Absolutely. You might not be at risk, but your granny or your grandfather, or the man or woman in the pew five doors down from you with lung disease or whose very elderly, might be. Actually, as Christians, we have a duty as Catholics, you know, that obligation of solidarity and the preferential option for those who are most vulnerable. We have an obligation to practise good hygiene, to protect them and to keep them safe. They are the most precious bit of our society. I think the government's aim is good, that we develop herd immunity to this. Herd immunity is where so many people have had it, or are vaccinated against an illness, that the virus can't circulate. That's why Mumps and Measles has come back because the vaccination rates have fallen below what we need to maintain the herd immunity. We won't get herd immunity this year to COVID-19 but what we might get is enough people practicing good hygiene to disrupt it and protect the most vulnerable.

Interviewer

And finally, Jim, let's just say I have identified in myself or someone around me, those symptoms that you've talked about. What do I do? Because I've had seven days self-isolation. I've heard 14 days self-isolation. I've heard 'phone 111, don't go to the doctors' and so forth. What do we do if we believe we're symptomatic?

Jim McManus

It's confusing because it's all changed in the last 48 hours and it's changed for the second time. So the current guidance says if you've got those symptoms... go home, self-isolate, stay at home for seven days or until the symptoms have gone, you know, *both* symptoms of fever. Go *online* to NHS 111 to do the assessment if you feel really ill. If you feel mildly ill, just treat it with paracetamol BUT if you begin to get ill, go *online* to NHS 111. That will then direct you to whether you need to go use the NHS 111 phone service. Obviously, if you get really, really, seriously ill, then you need to ring NHS 111. Follow the guidance on there.

So it's seven days at home, check NHS 111 online if you can't cope with your symptoms. If you're really seriously ill and very vulnerable, have heart disease or something, then use the NHS 111 phone service.

Interviewer

That's great. I should reiterate that our Bishops' Conference website is cbcew.org.uk. We will keep it front and centre, so you don't need to worry too much about delving into our healthcare page, which is where our actual advice is. So the home page www.cbcew.org.uk (that's the acronym for Catholic Bishops' Conference England Wales, if you're wondering) for our guidance. Now, Jim, you said we're in Stage 2, you have made provision for Stage 3. What is the thinking behind that?

Jim McManus

As we move into delaying an epidemic, if it gets really very bad, then we may suspend public gatherings, we may move to social distancing as much as possible. It may mean that schools close, but the scientific evidence as we speak today (*Friday 13 March*) means that the time is not right for that. And Stage 3 is basically the suspension of Masses and the suspension of public services. We prepared for this in 2009. Most people won't remember that, but we did prepare for it.

Stage 3 is about what you need to do and the pastoral care you can give people if you're not having public services. So Stage 3 is probably the equivalent to where Italy and Singapore are at the minute.

Interviewer

Jim McManus, thank you ever so much for both your help and guidance for the Catholic community and the work that you're doing.

Jim McManus

My pleasure. Thank you.