
Rector Zima: You can't have a plexiglass border

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Charles University's Rector Tomáš Zima was Zita Senková's guest at public broadcaster [Czech Radio](#) (Český rozhlas Dvojka), where he spoke at length about the single most important topic on everyone's mind: the Covid-19 pandemic.



Some excerpts from the interview:

As a doctor [and former dean at the First Faculty of Medicine – editor’s note], I want to thank all of the health care professionals on the frontlines. The system is working because of high moral calibre and a strong sense of personal responsibility among personnel, not least when you consider that the first days into the crisis protective masks were unavailable. Yet everyone had to be prepared just the same.

The dream of eradicating Covid-19 is similar to the worldwide eradication of smallpox in 1980. Just 13 years before, 15 million people were infected around the world and two million people died. If you want to completely wipe out a disease, it’s a task that takes years and decades. I don’t think we will be able to completely eliminate Covid-19 but what we may be able to do is rein it in, to gain immunity and get used to it being out there, similarly like the flu.

Do facemasks work?

In Asia, many people wore them even before, during flu epidemics, and I understand why, even if it was not the custom here. I would say masks are definitely needed if someone is ill or at work is in contact with many different people. Expert opinions differ, but for me it's a signal that the wearer at least is conscientious at the very least. Because we know that around 80 percent of those who catch Covid-19 show very mild symptoms.

Testing for the disease

You can test positive for Covid-19 and yet not look ill. Nor does it mean you will automatically catch it from someone who has it: infection is not a certainty. You likely have to spend a bit more time with the person in question. Testing is the one single way for not just the healthcare system to run smoothly but society as a whole. I am afraid that the coming months could see more people die from related-causes of the pandemic, the negative impact of social exclusion, unemployment, and high levels of stress.

The government needs a plan

It is necessary to stretch out or flatten the infection rate to slow the number of infections over time. We can't completely shut down, however, and go into a cocoon, or build a plexiglass fence around the whole of the Czech Republic... I think that the government should have an idea how – and when - to begin gradually lifting the current emergency measures. You can say "a lot of people have the virus now, so let's extend the measures". But in 10 days' time there will be even more cases! What then? It will have an impact on almost everyone, especially when you consider that around half have little in savings. Why hasn't the government pressed legislation against profiteering, for example? There are people who are trying to exploit the current situation.

Solidarity

Everyone who has gotten involved – from sewing homemade masks to technical new designs of safety equipment – deserves our thanks. It shows that in times of crisis we *can* join and work together. Sometimes we hear that people don't care anymore about what's happening around them, but I think what we have seen, in this difficult moment, sends a positive message.