Trump’s COVID-19 experience doesn’t prove anything

President Donald Trump says he’s recovered from COVID-19. Outside doctors say it’s too soon for him to return to public events, he’s coughing on Fox News, and he’s taking a potent steroid that can mask symptoms — but Trump says he’s not sick anymore. And he’s crediting that recovery to an experimental drug made by the company Regeneron, which he said on Wednesday was a “cure.”

“They gave me Regeneron, and it was, like, unbelievable. I felt good immediately,” he said in a video recorded at the White House.

There’s no evidence that the Regeneron drug had anything to do with how good Trump did or did not feel. There’s hardly any data that the drug, which is a cocktail of artificial antibodies against the coronavirus, works at all. So far, all we have are a few bits of information on a small group of patients that were published in a press release. Trump was also given two other drugs, the antiviral remdesivir and the steroid dexamethasone. There’s no reason to believe the Regeneron drug — which is actually named REGN-COV2; Regeneron is the name of the company that produces it — was the thing responsible for how he said he felt. For a single patient, there’s no way to tell for sure.

Antibody treatments could be a good way to treat COVID-19. The strategy is similar to convalescent plasma, which contains coronavirus antibodies generated by recovered patients. Instead of an unpredictable mixture of antibodies in blood, though, the drugs are concentrated cocktails of a few specific antibodies that seem to be particularly good at blocking the

virus. Another pharmaceutical company, Eli Lilly, also has an antibody drug in development.

But neither drug has been tested thoroughly enough to say if it helps, hurts, or does nothing at all. Trump's wild claims about Regeneron's candidate could make finding answers harder. That's what happened last time he talked up a treatment strategy — remember hydroxychloroquine? Trump's constant promotion of the anti-malarial drug, and the controversy around it, made people reluctant to enroll in clinical trials that were designed to figure out if it actually worked.

Trump also pressured federal agencies to quickly push out hydroxychloroquine. Experts worry that something similar could happen with Regeneron's antibody therapy. Trump is already pushing the Food and Drug Administration to authorize it quickly. The circumstances of his treatment also could skew the clinical trial process: he got the drug under compassionate use, which makes untested and experimental products available to people who are seriously ill. Heralding it as a cure makes it seem as if we know more about it than we actually do, while simultaneously leaving the impression that VIPs like the president can skip the line, while the rest of us run the risk of getting a placebo in a clinical trial.

In reality, though, we still don't know if someone who gets the drug is better off than someone who gets a placebo. That's what a trial is for. Hopefully, the drug works — but anyone who claims to have answers right now is just making things up.

Here's what else happened this week.

Research

Nearly One-Third of Covid-19 Patients in Study Had Altered Mental State

In one group of over 500 hospitalized COVID-19 patients,

nearly a third had some kind of confusion or delirium. These sorts of mental problems show up in other viral infections, as well, and could be triggered by inflammation. (Pam Belluck / *The New York Times*)

The Coronavirus Unveiled

Researchers around the world are taking pictures and building models of the tiny, destructive virus. The images are helping them understand how it attacks cells and makes copies of itself. (Carl Zimmer / *The New York Times*)

COVID-19 Is Now the Third Leading Cause of Death in the U.S.

The virus is killing more people than stroke, Alzheimer's, diabetes, kidney disease, and most other conditions that end up fatal. Right now, only heart disease and cancer are deadlier. (Youyou Zhou and Gary Stix / *Scientific American*)

Development

FDA Releases Long-Awaited COVID-19 Vaccine Guidance

Pharmaceutical companies have to track vaccine clinical trial participants for at least two months before they ask the Food and Drug Administration to authorize their candidates, new guidelines from the agency say. This all but guarantees there won't be an approval by election day — and could give people more confidence that the vaccines are being carefully evaluated. (Sydney Lupkin / *NPR)*

Eli Lilly says its monoclonal antibody cocktail is effective in treating Covid-19

Like Regeneron, Eli Lilly published a press release showing that its antibody drug can keep some people with COVID-19 from needing to be hospitalized. But the benefits were small, and the data isn't published in a medical journal. (Matthew Herper / *Stat News*)

‘I Won’t Be Used as a Guinea Pig for White People’

In the US, Black people are more likely to be hospitalized with and die from COVID-19 than white people. Because of historic mistreatment by the medical community, though, they’re the least likely group to trust a vaccine and are reluctant to sign up for clinical trials. Community leaders are trying to encourage participation to ensure that the vaccines aren’t only tested on white people. (Jan Hoffman / *The New York Times)*

Perspectives

He’s fought COVID-19 for months. Can he ever really beat it?

Former Indiana State football player Larry Brown was on a ventilator for 50 days. He’s been in rehab for months. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever be the same again. “Right now, I’m just trying to understand the new normal,” Brown told the *Associated Press*. (Tom Murphy / *Associated Press)*

Only one of their children survived Sandy Hook. Now school posed a new threat: The virus.

Isaiah Marquez-Greene’s sister was killed in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. He wasn’t sure if his parents would be able to endure sending him back to his boarding school during a pandemic. (John Woodrow Cox / *The Washington Post*)

More than numbers

To the more than 36,933,166 people worldwide who have tested positive, may your road to recovery be smooth.

To the families and friends of the 1,068,995 people who have died worldwide — 213,795 of those in the US — your loved ones are not forgotten.

Stay safe, everyone

https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/10/21509652/antivirus-covid-trump-regeneron-antibody-treatment