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Suicides Outpacing COVID-19 Deaths at California Hospital, Say Doctors

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Doctors at a California hospital say suicide is outpacing COVID-19 as a cause of death in their facility, and their county's shelter-in-place order is to blame.

"We've never seen numbers like this in such a short period of time," Dr. Mike deBoisblanc, head of the trauma department at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek, told [KGO](#). "I mean we've seen a year's worth of suicide attempts in the last four weeks."

Why are so many people trying to take their own lives? DeBoisblanc believes the shelter-in-place order — which is scheduled to end May 31 but could be extended — is the cause, and he says the order should be lifted.

"Personally, I think it's time," he said. "I think, originally, this was put in place to flatten the curve and to make sure hospitals have the resources to take care of COVID patients. We have the current resources to do that, and our other community health is suffering."

Kathy Hansen, who has been a trauma nurse at John Muir for nearly 33 years, told KGO "she is worried because not only are they seeing more suicide attempts, she says they are not able to save as many patients as usual."

"What I have seen recently, I have never seen before," Hansen said. "I have never seen so much intentional injury."

"They intend to die," she explained. "Sometimes, people will make what we call a 'gesture.' It's a cry for help. We're just seeing something a little different than that right now. It's upsetting."

According to KGO, "Hansen and deBoisblanc say they are seeing mostly young adults die by suicide. They are worried about the stress that isolation and job loss can bring as this quarantine continues."

Prolonged isolation can cause many serious conditions in humans, most of them stemming from depression and anxiety. This is especially true when, as in the case of state and local lockdown orders, there is no certain end to the isolation in sight. Suicide, of course, is one of the potential results, but so are [many other mental and physiological disorders](#).

Add to the isolation mass unemployment on a scale not seen since the Great Depression, and suicide is almost certain to rise dramatically. A 2015 [study](#) published in the journal *Lancet Psychiatry* found that worldwide, 45,000 suicides are linked to unemployment each year, and that number jumped 11 percent during the 2008 recession.

Southern California suicide hotlines were already [reporting](#) huge increases in the number of calls they were receiving just one month into the coronavirus lockdown.

Walnut Creek is farther north, in Contra Costa County, near San Francisco. Contra Costa County Crisis



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Center executive director Tom Tamura told KGO that “calls to their hotline are up, but not dramatically.” Still, he recognizes that the isolation brought on by the shelter-in-place order can have its downside.

“I think people have found themselves disconnected from the normal supportive networks that they have, churches and schools and book clubs, you name it,” Tamura said. “And that, coupled with the closure of some counseling services, people were maybe in a little bit of shock. They were trying to weather the storm a bit, but as that isolation has grown people have come to realize this isn’t a sprint, it is a marathon.”

DeBoisblanc and Hansen told KGO they’re raising the alarm over rising suicides “because they want the community to be aware, for people to reach out and support each other and for those who are suffering to know they can get help.”

Unfortunately, their pleas appear to be falling on deaf ears. In statements to KGO, both John Muir Health and Contra Costa County Health Services referred merely to physicians’ varied “opinions” on the shelter-in-place orders. John Muir Health said it “has been, and continues to be, supportive of the Shelter-in-Place order.” Contra Costa County Health Services, meanwhile, repeated the same old refrain: “We want to stress that the shelter-in-place order is saving lives at the same time.”

That, however, is a [highly dubious proposition](#), while a dramatic increase in suicides — assuming the doctors are telling the truth — is a fact. That’s just one more reason that the unconstitutional, destructive shelter-in-place order should be lifted immediately.



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