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HOST: We've all had to change and adapt in different ways during the coronavirus pandemic, none more so than our healthcare professionals. Dr. Deena Hinshaw has been the trusted voice for Albertans during the pandemic, calmly delivering daily briefings on the virus and telling Albertans what measures they should take to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Chief Medical Officer of Health for the Province of Alberta.

DEENA HINSHAW: One of the things that's really interesting about COVID-19 for me is that it has unmasked, in a way, that we truly are all in this together, which is to say that we have certain elements of how we live together, how our societies are organized that often tend to be hidden, that we don't see or that we might prefer not to see. And COVID-19 has really lifted a veil in some ways, by reminding us that those who have perhaps precarious work or work that they don't have the ability to do from home are those who are more likely to be exposed. And we've seen that in some of our larger workplace outbreaks and in some of our trends of who the individuals are, who are more, again, likely to be put in that path.

We've also seen what I think is interesting about COVID, that when we have an infectious disease that can spread from person to person, we can see that interconnection of the phrase six degrees of separation, which can often be kind of an interesting party trickier party game, where you get together and talk about who you know, and try to find those connections. COVID-19 shows how that's a challenge in time of infectious diseases, where I can spread, if I get COVID-19, that illness to those in my circle, who spread it to those in their circle, and quite quickly it can spread rapidly. So again, it really showcases how we have to work together to be successful against COVID.

Another thing about this virus that is challenging is the fact that many people who get infected have a relatively mild course of disease. And while that is a good thing, the challenge comes in the fact that people may be less motivated to take measures if they believe, potentially rightly, that they will only have a mild course of illness. And so there's less of an individual preservation motivation, and there has to be more of that collective effort, because the only way we can protect those who are at highest risk is truly by making sure that all of us every day are thinking about our actions, not just for ourselves, but for those around us as well.

It's a commonly held understanding in the neuroscience world that our brains are actually social organs, that we function in a network of other humans, that we are connected to the people around us in a very tangible, biological way, that our brain actually changes physically based on the interactions that we have with people, how other people respond to us, and how we respond to them. And it's that element that's embedded both in our neuroscience or brain development, also in that interaction as infectious disease can spread from one to another. All of those things, again, to me, showcase that we as humans are not just individuals. We live in a network of people and also we are inextricably connected to our environment. And again, COVID-19 shows us how we're connected to our plant environment, animal environments, and the ways that we interact with that nonhuman element of our environment also has impacts on our health, individually and collectively. So with all of these kinds of issues being shown to us by COVID, it really again highlights that our only way forward, our best way forward is to be all in this together.

The final point I want to make at that macro level is that with any kind of crisis, there will always be a divergence of opinions. And particularly in a time when evidence is incomplete and rapidly emerging, so evidence shifts and changes based on what research has been done, what the most recent understanding is, our best way of making decisions in that kind of rapid emerging evidence context is to



take the best of what we have that science can give us, and then put it into a context where we bring diverse perspectives together. Because we need to understand multiple different aspects of a response to a crisis in order to make the best possible decision.

So we are all in this together, biologically. We are all in this together, mentally. We're all in this together from a decision-making standpoint, where again, taking into account those different aspects will help us move forward more effectively.

And in my work in the ministry, I work with a policy team within the bureaucracy of the government, within the department. And of course, I also work by providing advice to elected officials. And in both of those contexts, again, it's so critical that there isn't just one person who has all the answers, that we all come together from our backgrounds, our experiences, that we bring what we have to offer together and work through these really difficult, sometimes messy decisions as a group.

We are often challenged by the time that we have available to us. And so part of that making process involves working towards interacting and taking into account all those different perspectives, but also then ultimately really needing to move forward quickly. So trying to find that balance, doing the best we can to integrate perspectives. And in a crisis, we have to be able to be flexible, to make decisions based on what we know, continue to assess and gather evidence, and then adjust those decisions so we can continually respond in our best way possible.

HOST: Dr. Deena Hinshaw was the keynote speaker at our recent leadership forum event. If you enjoyed this podcast, consider donating to The Walrus. We are a registered charity that relies on our community of donors and sponsors to produce compelling journalism events and podcasts. Learn more about how your support can make an impact at thewalrus.ca/donate. We're also excited to finally let you know about our new virtual events, beginning with The Walrus Talks at Home: Circular Economy on September 28th. Register at thewalrus.ca/events for a front row seat from the comfort of your own home.