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LETTER TO THE EDITOR
Subject: COVID-19

As a Montana physician practicing in a rural community I feel it is timely to share my thoughts and feelings with all my neighbors as our state prepares to transition from 'shelter-in-place' to the next phase of our battle against Covid-19.

My strongest feeling is one of gratitude. I am grateful for all my fellow citizens who did their very best to follow the guidelines laid out by Governor Bullock. I am grateful for my fellow healthcare workers. Many have put themselves on the front line to identify and treat the illness caused by this new virus. Others have adjusted their practice to curtail encounters that could be put off and to learn how to use telehealth technology to practice more safely. I am grateful for our state leadership that acted early and decisively to establish restrictions which were based on the best scientific evidence available at that time.

I feel deeply saddened by the hundreds of our neighbors who have suffered directly from COVID-19 and especially those who have lost loved ones. Small numbers do not reduce the pain of this loss, and I hope that all victims of this virus know they have the love and support of everyone in the state as they grieve.

We Montanans took this new challenge very seriously and to our credit we have been able to keep the activity of this virus to a relatively low level. Yet this success has come at a great cost, economically as well as emotionally. Thus, it is natural that we are very anxious to resume as much of our normal lives as we can. Many of us are increasingly impatient with giving up our freedoms: to work, to shop, to visit friends and family, and to travel. We anticipate that after our current directive to hunker down expires on April 24 our state leadership will start to open things up again. This brings me to share my fervent wishes about how we should go about this.

We need to re-open our entire medical capabilities to attend to ALL the medical needs of our population not just those related to COVID 19 and Medical Emergencies. Appropriate isolation and segregation capabilities have been adopted by Montana hospitals. Chronic medical condition management and

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elective procedures need to resume as soon as possible. Painful conditions and diseases such as hypertension and diabetes cannot be kept on hold indefinitely.

The reason that it is necessary to proceed in stages to re-open our society is that we are not yet armed with all the weapons that we need to keep this virus from spreading when we are more socially interactive.

To do this, every community, large and small, will need to continue testing and tracing contacts as before. And as our capacity for rapid, accurate testing increases, and when we have the staff to follow up with those who are ill and their contacts, we can move forward with assurance to opening up our society.

In the process of returning to normalcy your medical community must be fully open to attend to all ongoing health concerns.

We in Montana have done an outstanding job in responding to this pandemic. May we continue to listen to our leaders, work together, and support each other in the next phases of this battle.

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