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Professor Greg Shaw on Politics and Our Knowledge of Healthcare

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Greg Shaw, April 1, 2020

Charlie Schlenker: History shows the rhetoric surrounding a public health crisis affects what people know about it, their behavior, and the outcome.

Greg Shaw: A lot of motivated behavior; people learn what they want to learn.

Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist Greg Shaw says it matters a lot. Shaw specializes in healthcare policy. He says, people need to be given a reason to want to absorb health information and that's where politics enters.

Shaw: It's not a question necessarily of capacity, but of will.

Schlenker: Shaw says there are two broad categories of historical examples. In the first, the public understands the measures it takes to combat a crisis as unambiguous goods. Take Polio in the 1950's. Shaw says people learned about the vaccine, believed public health officials, and cases dropped fast. It was so not political that President Dwight Eisenhower offered the vaccine to the Soviet Union. You can argue that was a different, less divided time, right? But Shaw says the 1990's were certainly divided and proposed action to address babies dying from sudden infant death syndrome had a good outcome when parents believed the American Academy of Pediatrics and the since death rate dropped by half.

Shaw: and they got the message out that parents really need to put their kids to bed without all sorts of fluffy blankets and on their backs. So here's a tremendous success.

Schlenker: And here's the second type of historical example when there is a divided narrative: the AIDS crisis of the 1980's. Shaw says President Ronald Reagan did not lead on the issue. He didn't mention it in public for five years. The religious right filled the vacuum with a narrative that AIDS was divine retribution for alleged immoral behavior. And Shaw says there were consequences to public learning and behavior for an entire decade.

Shaw: And what you find that no better than a coin toss do Americans correctly say that you don't get AIDS from a toilet seat.

Schlenker: When there is a partisan divide, Shaw says people ignore the information that doesn't fit their basic worldview. Fast forward to the Affordable Care Act, and what people actually learned about it.

Shaw: Democrats beat Republicans on virtually every positive benefit of the law... However, Republicans beat Democrats on a couple of the Achilles heels of the law, principally the individual mandate.

Schlenker: Shaw says this divide is happening with the coronavirus pandemic too. Urban residents, Democrats, women, he says are likely taking public health advice very seriously. Rural people and Republicans, full show, have been later to accept the idea of a need to shelter in place.

Shaw: ... and to the extent that Trump gets out and reinforces that by saying, in January or February, 'this is not going to become a pandemic, this is not a big deal.' In fact, he goes to South Carolina in late February and says, 'this is the Democrats new hoax.' That reinforces a predisposition of rural people that could have been tipped the other way.

Schlenker: Shaw says friends of the President have also waged a social media war against Dr. Anthony Fauci, a leading expert voice on the pandemic.

Shaw: It is both something that has cost us lives already, and will continue to so long as we are not feeding good solid information about how to minimize transmission.

Schlenker: Shaw says he wants Republicans to pay attention to the health experts and reputable journalism, and to caution Democrats not to discount the issue of the pandemic response on lives and the economy. Shaw says people need to accept the idea that it's not 'I love Trump' or 'I hate Trump' but that things must be more nuanced than that. I'm Charlie Schlenker.