

## **Why did HBO Crush It! & Should You Catch Omicron?**

What Happens Next – 01.23.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where the speaker gets to present his argument in just Six Minutes and that is followed by a question-and-answer session for deeper engagement. Today's discussion is on why HBO has been so successful in revolutionizing television and has Omicron peaked?

Our first speaker today is Jim Miller who is the author of the recently released book *Tinderbox: HBO's Ruthless Pursuit of New Frontiers*. Jim is an investigative journalist who has been on the Hollywood beat for years. His books have covered the history of Creative Artists Agency, Saturday Night Live, ESPN and now HBO. I hope to learn from Jim about how HBO was so successful for so long with different executive teams. What is HBO's secret sauce? I want to hear about HBO Sport's historical success by focusing on boxing and tennis. I also want to find out why HBO crushed it with the Sopranos and was cutting edge with its decision to run TV series like *Sex and the City*, *the Wire*, and *Game of Thrones*. HBO has done a lot of things right, what are the lessons to learn?

Our second speaker today is Dr. Ari Ciment who is a pulmonologist at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Miami Beach. Ari has treated thousands of COVID patients since the March 2020 outbreak. Ari has been my guest on the last five shows and he is officially a regular.

Here are my topics for Ari this week:

Should I proactively try to get Omicron?

What causes Covid Brain Fog and will it go away?

How did the medical community work together to create a treatment plan for Covid?

Alright, let's get started with our first speaker Jim Miller.

Jim Miller:

I've got five headlines.

Headline number one is, "Entrepreneurs and the people who actually dream up these big ideas aren't necessarily guaranteed a seat at the table This happened with ESPN, Bill Rasmussen, who had the idea to do ESPN was pushed out by the money men.

And in HBO's case, Chuck Dolan, from Cablevision. Chuck wrote the original memo. He sent it because he wasn't able to finance everything on his own. He sent it to his partners at Sterling Cable. And Sterling Cable had a majority shareholder named Time Inc. And Time Inc gave him the seed money to start HBO, but he didn't last as long as Rasmussen did.

Sometimes the great entrepreneurs, the people who actually invent something, they're not entitled to stay around and be part of the ongoing operation.

The second headline is, "Like many great stories, the precariousness of HBO's infancy cannot be overstated." There were some difficult years early on in HBO's history. And there were several times when they almost hit the delete key on it. The power of an individual, the right person, with the right power, can save something, even though there may be a lotta people who are advocating for its dismissal.

HBO always had a parent company. And early on, that was Time Inc. And there were a lot of people who, particularly after HBO was losing money, 1976 was its most difficult year, it lost millions of dollars, which was a big deal back then.

Jim Shepley, who was the president of Time Inc., basically said to everybody, " We're going to stay the course." You can't, undervalue the importance of the power of somebody who really believes in an idea.

The third headline: disruption works. It is a vital ingredient to success. Early on in HBO's history, they decided that they weren't going to mimic what the networks were doing. They were going to do something different. And a prime example of that is the comedy world.

If you were a comedian in the late '70s and the '80s, your dream was to be on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. And if you were so lucky to get on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, you probably had about four and a half minutes' standup. The network censors would basically do a colonoscopy on your standup, because there were these subjects that you couldn't talk about, words that you couldn't say.

Along comes HBO and Michael Fuchs, "We're going to give you an hour. And not only that, you can say whatever you want." George Carlin HBO comedy special doing the seven words that you can't say on television. I mean, what could be more mind-blowing than that? Steve Martin, George Carlin, Eddie Murphy: The list is incredible. And many comedians look to HBO as one of the major engines of their career.

The fourth thing is HBO decided that, unlike the networks, they weren't going to micromanage the creative process. One of the ways that they could bring creative talent over to HBO was to give them the freedom and the agency to do what they want. Oz was one of the most important early dramas on HBO, and Chris Albrecht, who was running programming at the time, said to Tom Fontana, the creator of Oz, "What's one of the things that you were never able to do at a network?" And Fontana looked at him, and he said, "Well, we could never kill off the main lead in the first episode." And Albrecht said to him, "Do it."

When you talk to David Chase, the creator of The Sopranos, Larry David, Curb Your Enthusiasm, David Simon, the brilliant mind behind The Wire: the things that they bring up is their ability to have a vision for their show and not be interfered with.

Then finally, the fifth, "When the Lord wants to punish, he answers your prayers." HBO wreaked havoc on both the movie studios and the networks early on in its history by coming up with new paradigms. And lo and behold, the same thing was done to them by Netflix. And once you get into 2012 and onward, HBO is on the defensive. They're no longer the only game in town that's offering and playing by this playbook.

You can ride this wave of success for quite some time, but then it's only a question of time 'til someone comes along and does the same thing to you that you did to the people you were conquering decades ago.

Larry Bernstein:

Jim, why did you decide to dedicate such a substantial portion of your book on the business side of HBO, why should we care about the suits?

Jim Miller:

As someone who has worked on both the creative side and the business side in media, suits aren't just accounting types, trying to make budgets. There are creative people who rise to corporate power. And even though they become a suit, they're still incredibly devoted to the creative side of the business.

These are businesses and public companies. So, they have duties to investors and shareholders that sometimes don't align with the wishes of creative partners.

People need to understand that there are responsibilities beyond the creative process.

Larry Bernstein:

The suits are making the decision of whether to invest say 100 million dollars in Game of Thrones or The Sopranos. That is the call they need to make. In your book you mention that Netflix outbid HBO for House of Cards. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.

And what I found surprising is that HBO's organizational decision-making process was so effective. There was a lot of turnover at HBO, but different suits who ran programming consistently made the right decisions.

Jim Miller:

William Goldman's, great quote, "Nobody knows anything," I think it's overstated. But the truth is how many studios passed on Titanic? Everybody knows the ending, and the movie's been made several times before. A totally legitimate position, except it turned out that that was wrong, and it's one of the most successful movies ever made.

You have a moment where HBO sends out a pilot to The Sopranos for testing.

The audience doesn't like Tony Soprano. They don't really understand the world. There are not a lot of likable characters. And I think it's fair to say that at many networks would've pulled the plug at that point.

What Jeff Bewkes and Chris Albrecht decide is that despite these test results, we believe it can work." And so they go against the grain and they commit to it. They happened to luck out there. HBO went on a great streak. In a very short amount of time after Larry Sanders and Oz, you had Sex and the City, The Sopranos, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Six Feet Under, The Wire.

But the truth is, they also had John from Cincinnati. Lewis and Clark program was a 25-million-dollar write off, and never even went to the air. There are no guarantees in this business. You try and have a good batting average, and when you need to double down and when you need to escape. That's the key.

Larry Bernstein:

What is it about HBO's DNA that allowed different individuals in that same programmer's seat to make the right call?

Jim Miller:

There is a DNA for the HBO brand.

Carolyn Strauss, Chris Albrecht and Bridget Potter carried them through for a while. That's not to say that there wasn't a lot of disagreement. The Comeback and Enlightened, those are two shows that were canceled after the first season. Both of those shows deserved more time.

That was part of the HBO brand which is unlike the networks, "We're going to give you time to grow. And to find your way." The Sopranos wasn't The Sopranos until episode five. But they hung in there. And sometimes it takes more than a season.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about sports next.

Tell us about how HBO looked at sports differently than its competitors. And how did HBO change sports entertainment?

Jim Miller:

What happened with HBO Sports early on falls under that rubric that I was talking about disruption.

Because the networks had basically given up on boxing. They'd moved it to Saturday afternoons, when everybody's doing their yard work. And boxing was no longer a part of the culture the way it had been in the '50s and '60s.

They engineer a satellite hookup for Ali-Frazier in Manila, and then they decide they're going to go after boxing in a big way. And they go to the promoters.

Michael Sheets says to Don King and Seth Abraham, who was running HBO, "We're going to put you in prime time. We're going to cover the sport outside of the actual fights.

"And we don't have commercials, we're going to be there for the pre-fight. We're going to be there an hour or two afterwards. We are going to go deep into this world of boxing."  
HBO is perfectly positioned for this new world of Marvin Hagler and Tommy Hearns and most importantly, Mike Tyson.

Boxing is a huge, huge part of HBO's development. HBO research shows that early on in its history, men were controlling their remote and the wallet. And a lot of their subscribers were buying it for boxing.

They brought us Wimbledon during the week. Back then, you saw Wimbledon on the weekends. And you didn't see the early rounds.

Tennis and boxing became the foundation for HBO Sports.

And then come 2000, they have to give up Wimbledon, because now they're in the original programming game. And they'd much rather spend that money on big time series or big documentary series from Earth to the Moon or Band of Brothers or things like that than sports rights. And HBO Sports really gets diminished. ESPN cleans their clock with 30 for 30 documentaries.

Larry Bernstein:

How did HBO differentiate itself from the networks and other cable channels for the production of high-quality documentary programming?

Jim Miller:

What Sheila Nevins did at HBO in the world of documentaries was transcendent and just incredible. She revolutionized the form. Sheila had the documentary world to herself. And she took advantage of it, she went high and she went low, as Michelle Obama would say.

Like Real Sex and Taxicab Confessions were enormously popular. And she did Academy Award winning documentaries that were on the front pages of The New York Times like Paradise Lost, The Jinx, or Chernobyl. Every compelling story that was in the culture somehow made its way to HBO Documentaries.

I was talking to Nancy and Lisa who run HBO Documentaries now, people would come in and pitch a documentary to Sheila Nevins and sometimes she would say no, and then a year later, she'd say, "I changed my mind. Let's do it."

Now, somebody comes in and pitches, there's no luxury for time. It's much more competitive, the good news is that the audience has more choices for that kind of storytelling.

Larry Bernstein:

The Sopranos revolutionizes television. How did HBO crush it?

Jim Miller:

There's an interesting link between The Sopranos and Succession, which is a huge hit for HBO now. With Succession, they decided they were going to make the show the star rather than have stars in the show. Not to say that Brian Cox isn't a great actor, Jeremy Strong, but none of them were household names. And they made a point of casting people that were going to be great for the show, and the show became the star. That's one ingredient.

That was mirrored with The Sopranos, aside from Lorraine Bracco, who received an Academy Award nomination for her incredible work in Goodfellas.

The second thing that's instructive about Succession and I think the seeds were planted with the Sopranos is, there aren't a lot of likable characters. Who do you root for in Succession? Who do you even like?

The biggest creative disagreement that ever occurred between HBO and The Sopranos creator, David Chase, was over episode five. It's called College. I think it's one of the great hours ever done in television. And David had written it where there's an old nemesis of Tony's, and Tony strangles him and sends him to hell.

And Chris Albrecht was afraid that the lead can't be seen killing a guy. And a lot of people I talked to said, "Well, wait a second, they already made that decision when James Gandolfini's cast and he's got a hairy back and he's in a wife beater t-shirt.

And Chris relented, because David said to him, "Look, if we don't do this, then this show isn't what it says it is. And this is the reality of this world." And it comes down to decisions. All these tiny grains of sand make up a beach, and they wind up being incredibly important, not only to the future of a show but to the HBO brand.

Larry Bernstein:

When you compare Curb Your Enthusiasm with Seinfeld, why do you think that Curb could only have been made on HBO?

Jim Miller:

The Seinfeld show wasn't even a hit when it first started. The Seinfeld chronicles started, it was basically friends and relatives watching it. One of the hallmarks of Grant Tinker and Brandon Tartikoff at NBC, the suits, is that they decided that they were going to stick with things.

Even Law and Order, I remember Brandon saying to Dick Wolf, "You better get some women in there, or else we're going to throw this thing out the window." They were able to stick with things and support them, even though they weren't getting the numbers.

The only way to be in business with Larry David is to give him complete freedom. The show is still on 21 years after it started. He disappeared for eight years, it's unheard of. But if you build that into your way of doing business with somebody like that, then there are no rules. Sometimes suits can be incredibly vital, without being persnickety by creating that freedom and by letting an important creator know that, "Look, you're not ready next year? That's fine. Let us know when you are." David Chase took off some time. There were there were some big interludes with The Sopranos.

When The Sopranos came back after long exoduses, the ratings went up.

Larry Bernstein:

Sometimes great TV is not the biggest moneymaker. My favorite program on HBO was The Wire. It was so revolutionary, so creative, but it had difficulty finding its audience. How did HBO management think about The Wire?

Jim Miller:

It's funny because David Simon talked to me at great length about this. Not only did it not get the ratings, but it also didn't get the awards that it should have. There was a, kind of a trifecta at HBO for many years, ratings are not paramount, but we want to win a lot of awards and we want that kind of recognition, so more people come into the tent. And we also want to be part of the larger dialogue.

Chris Albrecht said to David Simon, "Look, I don't mind that you don't get ratings. I'd love to see this on the front page of the New York Times." And the Wire did that. The Wire was important because it created new discussions and new narratives outside of television. They were talking about huge things in our world, about drugs and law enforcement and communities and everything else. And HBO thought it was so important that they were able to justify it on that alone.

Larry Bernstein:

There are different TV business models: the networks obviously cannot charge for subscribers, and HBO used cable companies to pay them for their product. How did HBO's business model determine the programming that it offered?

Jim Miller:

HBO never had contact with their customers, for a while there, people at HBO loved it. We don't have to sell it. We don't have to fix the cable box. We don't have to install it. If you got a problem, call Comcast, call Spectrum, call whatever. What a God send.

Turns out though, they wanted to know who their customers were. Amazon and Netflix, they know everything about us as subscribers. They know what we order. They can suggest other things. They can sell off our information in a way that HBO couldn't. And that became very, very problematic. One of the biggest matzo balls in the whole kind of soup of HBO's challenges.

Larry Bernstein:

Did you write your book *Tinder Box* because you thought that to understand the future of media entertainment you need to understand the past and HBO's history specifically?

Jim Miller:

The next two years are going to be pivotal, they will determine the next decade. What do these entities have to do to survive? HBO has to keep on doing a very, very good job, having a *Sopranos* is not enough, so you have *Mare of Easttown*, you have *White Lotus*, you have *Succession*, you have to have a pipeline that is full of arresting entertainment that people are going to want to come back to time and time again.

Project Popcorn, they got a lot of criticism, particularly within the Hollywood community about how they were bypassing exhibitors, or at least debuting things on HBO Max. It turned out to be a success in terms of their sub growth, and they had to pay a fortune to talent, basically paying them as if it had been in theaters and, that is a part of the business that is still being figured out.

The way that David takes HBO in the future may not be the way that Viacom takes Showtime or Reed and Ted take on Netflix. It's a very precarious time, but it's also a very dynamic and exciting time.

Larry Bernstein:

Your book *Tinder Box* tells a story by laying out a collection of edited interviews. Why did you use that approach for storytelling?

Jim Miller:

I approached it as a journalist to write a history that's a book of record. It's not like I take a bunch of interviews and just edit them and throw them together. I have to do a lot of reporting to make sure that that's actually happened.

The second thing is, this happened with *Saturday Night Live*, it happened with ESPN, it happened with CAA, and now with HBO. I don't care if you're Hemingway, I don't think that there's anybody that can write a book with the verisimilitude and the transparency that I want without hearing directly from these people. To hear Billy Murray talk about Gilda Radner's



death and the last time he saw her in his own words, I mean, I do a lot of writing in these books, and I write interstitials that are connective tissue too because narrative structure is very important to me, and I also want to help the reader along and give them factual information that serves context so they understand it.

But I think that hearing directly from these people, hearing directly from Michael Fuchs in the HBO book and his sensibilities. You understand his fearlessness. You understand his hubris. When Julia Louis-Dreyfus is talking about Veep or the creators of Game of Thrones, over 700 interviews to talk with me about their work and their approach and what was in their mind and setting the scene for the reader, I personally think that that's unequaled.

It would have taken me half as long to write this book if I decided to sit down at my computer and bang out a history, just with prose. Doing an oral history is like climbing Everest on a cold day in your shorts. You've got to get the right people. You've got to beg them. You've got to go back to them. I interviewed Jeff Bewkes 32 times.

And it's because every time I had an interview with somebody, it told me another part of the story, I'd call up Jeff and say, "Wait a second, you didn't tell me that," and he'd say, "Oh, I was hoping you wouldn't find that out." But it's a huge pain in the ass. But it's worth it. And I hope it gives readers a unique take on the history of these places.

There are tons of reporters who cover the agency world, tons of sports reporters who cover ESPN. I have to bring something different to the table. And, this is the way that I = decided to do it.

Larry Bernstein:  
Jim, thank you very much.

Jim Miller:  
Larry, thank you, and I appreciate the level of insight into your questions.

Larry Bernstein:  
We welcome back Dr. Ari Ciment. This is our fifth straight week together on What Happens Next. Ari, what is new in the hospital's Covid ward?

Ari Ciment:  
The peak probably occurred in hospitals around our area. Overall, if you look up IHNE COVID Projections, you'll see in Florida the hospital resource use starting to come down. We're seeing daily infections clearly locally are lower and lower. You can look up Miami-Dade COVID Tracker the percentage today, it's something like 29% positivity. Yesterday it was 34%. So, we're seeing a down-trend of local infection rates, and the hospital rates use lags two to three weeks behind.

Larry Bernstein:

I never want to get Omicron. The plan is to lay low till herd immunity. But Omicron is so infectious. And if take off the mask in the future I assume that I will get sick. So, am I delaying the inevitable? Will I get infected in 3 or 6 months or a year as soon when I return to normal behavior? Omicron is not going away, someone in my community will have it. What should I do?

Ari Ciment:

Well, if the numbers locally are down, then the numbers around you are going to be obviously lower, so the likelihood of you being infected are not going to be high. If the percentage of positivity rate drops below 10%, there's no reason for you to wear a mask. The better question is whether or not you want to get the Omicron. If you're triple-boosted and not with many risk factors, maybe it's better for you in the long run. It's not such a crazy concept to think that it will afford you better immunity down the road.

Larry Bernstein:

There's been a lot of press that T-cells are better than boosters for long-term defense against COVID and its future variants. Do you think it makes sense to try to get infected with Omicron because the known consequences are not that bad? And if so, when and how should we do it?

Ari Ciment:

I personally don't advise people sniffing positive COVID patients' mucus to try to get it.

Larry Bernstein:

(Laughs)

Ari Ciment:

But I think it makes sense not to be so overly careful that you're inhibiting your lifestyle, assuming you don't have a lot of risk factors. If you're a 65 and older with coronary disease, hypertension, diabetes, you're better off waiting for the therapeutics down the line, which are going to be really rigorous and good. It makes sense, even against a future variant. But if you're young and healthy, there is perhaps some truth that you could, if you're triple-boosted, meaning you have two vaccines and a booster, if you get Omicron, then you're super immune because you have both T-cells and you have B-cells ramped up for the next variant down the line. I personally don't believe there's going to be another crazy COVID variant because I think the Omicron will really be the bomb that covered everybody across the world. But in case there is another variant down the road, SARS-CoVs-345, you're probably better off if you had this Omicron, which is the lightest one we've seen, assuming you've triple-boosted.

Larry Bernstein:

I'm triple-boosted, and I was infected with COVID Alpha in early December 2020. Would you still advise that I get Omicron as well?

Ari Ciment:

I wouldn't advise that you get it. But I wouldn't inhibit the lifestyle so much that you really feel like, "Oh my gosh, I can't go to that bar mitzvah or wedding." I'm speaking more to the people that have had Omicron and had two vaccines or had the booster. They should really feel like, "Hey, I don't necessarily need to wear my mask around."

The UK announced yesterday, we're no longer doing vaccine passport and we're not mandating indoor masks anymore. That makes sense to me. However, I feel like in America, it's going to be tough because President Biden just sent out 400 million masks, so that's not the time to say, "Oh, you don't have to wear a mask now." It's not going to be politically appropriate. But it's something for us to start getting used to.

Larry Bernstein:

When I was a kid, parents would sometimes host chicken pox parties where kids would be invited over to catch it. Are you recommending Omicron parties?

Ari Ciment:

So, not having Omicron parties, because doing that... is not showing sensitivity to the people with the higher risk factors, the 65 and older you're not going out positively trying to get the disease because you might infect somebody who's immunocompromised. But, you don't have to be so overly protective. I just recently had a bar mitzvah. Many people didn't come because they were scared of Omicron, and I totally understand. But these are healthy people who've already had three vaccines. You could bend a little bit at this point.

Larry Bernstein:

I probably should have attended the bar mitzvah.

Ari Ciment:

(laughs)

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic: brain fog. After I was discharged from the hospital, my brain was clearly compromised. I could not remember names. I left the hospital on Christmas Day 2020 and the NFL football season had just ended. I'm a big Chicago Bears fan, and I follow the team very closely. And I quizzed myself to name as many Chicago Bears players on the roster as I could, and I could only name one, where previously I could have named 20.

And then over the following six months, I noticed substantial improvement, not only with names, but with word retrieval as needed in conversations. I had brain fog. What is the medical condition that causes this problem, and why does it go away, and why should patients feel confident that it will?

Ari Ciment:

If you're triple-vaccinated, you're less likely to have brain fog if you were infected. This was studied in Israel in Bar-Ilan University. You could look it up. They looked at previously infected people who were vaccinated versus unvaccinated, and the numbers were pretty striking, the incidence of brain fog in post-COVID syndrome were much less in the vaccinated. So, it has more than just infection prevention utility but against brain fog.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think that the reason why the vaccinated are having less brain fog is because the disease is less harmful to them?

Ari Ciment:

As you see the pathophysiology behind it, it's real and it has to do with cytokine storms and it's going to be lower in those patients that are vaccinated. The question is, what is brain fog? Like, you mentioned that you lost memory. Is it dizziness? Is it headaches? Fatigue? It's a very vague, they call it post-COVID syndrome.

Larry Bernstein:

For me, my brain was working at 2/3rds the usual speed. I couldn't make witty remarks on time. I couldn't get word retrieval or name recognition. So, it wasn't like I had headaches... I was just dumb.

Ari Ciment:

You looked like you were a little akinetic, like a slow speed. Google, Professor Akiko Iwasaki, she published a very interesting article on the pathophysiology behind COVID, looking at mice studies showing cytokine elevation in the CSF even after a mild infection in the mice. So certain cytokines are increased. The one that they were talking about is CCL-11, but there's a whole list of cytokines that are increased seven days, and then even weeks after a mild infection. It gives some solace to some of the patients knowing that they're not making up their symptoms. But the good news is usually it does subside over months in some cases. But usually it does go away. I've seen some really terrible cases of post-COVID syndrome fog, and they have by and large gone away over time.

That study that she looked at also looked at a thing called microglial activity in the white matter of the brains, which they found in autopsy studies as well in humans showing that there's certain area in the brain that are affected by the virus not directly, but by distill inflammation and cytokine release, including what you described, in the hippocampal areas, which is important for memory. So, it does affect different parts of the brain.

Larry Bernstein:

My understanding is that the brain's natural defenses protect it against most viral attacks, but that was clearly not true for COVID. Do you think that patients' loss of taste or smell is indicative of a viral attack to the brain or something else? And why do the conditions improve over time, with most problems resolving in three to six months?

Ari Ciment:

The loss of taste and smell, which we found out early here in our experience in Miami. But, it's not seen in the Omicron variant for whatever reason. I can't tell you the pathophysiology behind it. It's not clear if it's direct to the smell cell to olfactory cells, because it's right near the nasal pharynx, or if it's a cytokine-induced interference.

My opinion with Omicron, where we are seeing some people that lose their taste and smell, that's related to the sinusitis, to the stuffiness occurring there.

Larry Bernstein:

Right.

Ari Ciment:

But to the actual COVID, my gestalt was that it was actually nerve damage, nerve infiltration of the olfactory cells. In some people, it took six months. That's more nerve damage. And then it would slowly recover.

Larry Bernstein:

So why is there brain fog? What causes it and why do patients recover?

Ari Ciment:

I think that the cytokines eventually go down. First of all, the, the majority of people don't have the brain fog but a large portion of people do. I think it's related to exactly what Professor Iwasaki was showing, that there is a cytokine inflammation that's causing the brain to be a little messed up.

And then boom, you're back to normal.

Larry Bernstein:

New topic. How did the medical community determine best practices for COVID treatments in real time? Hospitals faced a novel disease simultaneously worldwide. There was experimentation. Doctors started with treatments that worked for other viruses; some worked and some didn't. How did that discovery process work? How did the medical community work with each other, and how were the best ideas implemented and the worst rejected?

Ari Ciment:

I think a lot of the information spread by social media initially, and it was actually a detriment to us all that the virus started in China for many reasons, but one is because they're really closed. I was able to go online initially and look up at the Chinese health official recommendations for COVID, and that's where I personally had ideas about convalescent plasma, interferon treatment, because we were learning you could actually translate their journals, their

recommendations their CDC. In America, let's say Harvard, Yale, big institutions, they were keeping their protocols initially to themselves because nothing was evidence-based.

If you look at the first NIH guidelines on COVID treatment, it goes over all these things like Plaquenil, Ivermectin, plasma. And it says, "Nothing is evidence-based. Nothing is proven. So, we can't recommend anything." So, you read this document, which is like 130 pages, and it's telling you, you can't do anything. So thankfully, I think at that time, believe it or not, the government did the right thing. They were not stopping local hospitals from treating the way you felt best. So initially, we were treating the regular therapies. You couldn't use nebulize therapies, but you had to use inhalers. But quickly we adapted when we saw things were not working the way they work with other diseases.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's pick one treatment in particular, plasma. In 1918, plasma was used successfully with the Spanish Flu. I received plasma when I was hospitalized with COVID in December 2020, but I received it late, 10 days after testing positive with COVID. Do you think that the use of plasma was successful in treating COVID patients?

Ari Ciment:

We started plasma pretty early here, and there were so many problems. First of all, you weren't sure if the patient had a robust immune response, so the plasma might not have had an adequate antibody towards the disease. So, there's a high amount of antibody in the plasma depending on your response to the disease. We were injecting people's plasma just because they had a positive test 14 days prior. So part of it was perhaps ineffectiveness because of that high-titer plasma. But part of it was because the timing was off. A lot of these patients initially were treated with COVID pneumonia, but they were treated four weeks into the disease, so we know that if you treat things earlier, you were more likely to be successful.

David Sullivan, he's an infectious disease doctor at Johns Hopkins. It's not published yet in a peer-reviewed journal, but his study on early treatment with plasma was a positive trial. It really does work if you start early. In South America too, they showed that if you treat it early, you're going to have a benefit, because it has the anti-spike antibodies within the plasma. His study, even though it's late and now we have better therapies, I think that's a monumental study because many years from now, God forbid, when we have another pandemic, people are going to look at his article and they're going to say, "We've got to get high-titer plasma. We got to inject it earlier."

A lot of the places, like one drive here locally, they did a great job. They're heroes because they tried. They were still a little late. Like, we could have had an established plasma program earlier on. The other interesting aspect to this is that there is an active ACTIV arm of the NIH, which looks at funky therapies like plasma. And there are companies that are looking at polyclonal antibodies, which is plasma from, like, cows. Look at this company SAB Therapeutics. I can't fully understand it, but it's a cow that is genetically altered to have the immune system of a human, and then they inject the organism into the cow and they develop polyclonal antibodies.

It's plasma. So they inject that into the patient. They're going to have a positive trial soon. We won't need that because we're going to have Paxlovid, Molnupiravir and monoclonal antibodies here. We won't need it for this pandemic. But it will be useful for the next, God forbid, pandemic.

Larry Bernstein:

Ari, every episode we end with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about this week?

Ari Ciment:

I'm optimistic I think masks are going to start coming off and people are going to celebrate for the holidays coming up.

The infections are exponentially declining. The actual number locally is that it dropped by 3,000 cases a day. Last week was like 65,000. The week before it was 87,000. So we're coming down pretty fast.

Larry Bernstein:

That's good news. Ari, thank you.

Ari Ciment:

Thank you.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Jim and Ari for joining us today.

That ends today's session. I want to make a plug for next week's show.

I am very excited to be joined by one of my best friends, Chris Riback who is a former 60 Minutes Producer who now creates his own morning curated newsletter as well as a podcaster. His podcast is called Chris Riback Conversations. I hope to learn from Chris about the changing world of media, and the future of podcasting. It is going to be really fun.

If you are interested in listening to a replay of today's What Happens Next program or any of our previous episodes or if you wish to read a transcript, you can find them on our website [Whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://Whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Replays are also available on Apple Podcasts, Podbean and Spotify.

Good bye.