

# Jamie Sarkonak: 'Covid Collateral' puts spotlight on pandemic-era incompetence

*New Canadian-produced documentary revisits bureaucratic failures of the pandemic years*

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Professor Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford University is interviewed in this still from the new documentary, Covid Collateral. PHOTO BY MATTER OF FACT MEDIA

## Article content

Some might say North America is in a competence crisis. Today's students can't read as well as their predecessors; workers are increasingly hired on non-meritocratic bases; medical errors and aviation "safety issues" are on the rise. Meanwhile, decision-makers are often so risk-averse they struggle to decide anything. At small scales, everything still works. But at large scales, the effects can be disastrous.

It's a problem whose symptoms can be observed all over, but the key case study is probably COVID-19. The reasons for this are condensed into 118 minutes in the new, Canadian-produced documentary *Covid Collateral*.

It's a film about the suppression of scientists and the devastating effects of policy choices that only appeared to have universal support.

The documentary's focus is the public health system — the domain of scientists and bureaucrats — and the number of ways in which it failed. It blames the suffocation of policy criticism and the memetic adoption of poorly supported pandemic interventions.

It hears primarily from those who saw holes in COVID policy, from the early extreme interventions in China, to the uncritical adoption of said extreme interventions in the West, to massively overestimated virus fatality rates, to dubious lockdowns, to the censorship of those who defied the "consensus" for these measures. In that way, it's one-sided, but then again, the viewer might not need the "pro-lockdown" side: anyone who wasn't living under a rock during the COVID years should be familiar with it.

What we didn't hear much of during the COVID years were dissenting voices. In Canada, there were a good number of skeptical health-care workers who lost their jobs for publicly questioning restrictions; in *Covid Collateral*, they get to talk about it. Online, expert critics like Stanford University's Jay Bhattacharya, a professor of medicine and economics, were victims of pre-Musk Twitter censorship. Now unmuzzled, Bhattacharya tells his side in the documentary.

Also interviewed is former White House Coronavirus Task Force member Scott Atlas, a familiar face for anyone who watched Trump-era COVID news conferences, who offers a view into the American executive office. A number of others chime in on policy and law, and even Roman Baber, former Ontario MPP ousted from the Progressive Conservative caucus, makes an appearance.

While politicians are mentioned here and there, *Covid Collateral* does its best to remain politically palatable to the average viewer by refraining from pinning blame on left or right. Premier Doug Ford, former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and former president Donald Trump appear in some frames, but they avoid being painted as the villains of the story. Nor does it get into the touchiest aspects of COVID science: vaccines are mentioned, but they aren't promoted, nor are they falsely decried as being part of some conspiracy; ivermectin gets a few minutes in, demonstrating the rigid refusal of authorities to entertain options (it did show promise in the early pandemic days).

The real culprit the documentary points to is the failure of expertise, which is a problem that predated and outlasted the pandemic. This big-picture problem is perhaps articulated best in a feature last year by Palladium Magazine, which argued that “Complex Systems Won’t Survive the Competence Crisis.” It wasn’t about the COVID pandemic, but rather, the waning meritocratic nature of the bureaucracies holding up 21st century life in the West due to “systematic promotion of the unqualified and sidelining of the competent.”

“The resulting norms have steadily eroded institutional competency, causing America’s complex systems to fail with increasing regularity. In the language of a systems theorist, by decreasing the competency of the actors within the system, formerly stable systems have begun to experience normal accidents at a rate that is faster than the system can adapt.”

In a way, that’s what COVID felt like. The system received flawed inputs, and, rather than correct for them once these inputs were discovered to be flawed, the actors within couldn’t, or wouldn’t, de-regulate. Instead, they sought more flawed inputs to justify more flawed measures, which harmed the general population in a number of ways. *Covid Collateral* tries to pinpoint those inputs, pondering why alternatives weren’t taken.

For a final demonstration of her thesis, the documentary’s producer, Vanessa Dyllyn, is running into the same problems her subjects faced when it comes to getting her work out there.

“I was met with a wall of polite silence across Canada,” she told journalist Paul Thacker earlier this spring, who was also interviewed in the documentary.

“But what was worse, I was met with hostility from my own colleagues. Outside of the key creatives, it was very hard to get production accountants, or business affairs people to work on the film. Even a closed-captioning technician turned it down. A publicist in Canada won’t touch this.”

Even after COVID-era health measures have been folded and put away, the stigma that comes with questioning them lives on. The crisis of competence will last a while longer yet.

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