Testing and Flying

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Eakinomics: Testing and Flying

One of the most difficult aspects of public policy over the past year has been the interplay between public health considerations and the economy. The initial issue was the use of lockdowns. Lockdowns were initially envisioned as a last-ditch measure when COVID-19 cases threatened to overrun the health system. Somehow the objective seemingly shifted to using lockdowns to eliminate the virus – an unrealistic objective that came at an enormous economic cost. In retrospect, the bulk of the public health objectives can be achieved by effective social distancing and mask wearing. The additional step of quarantine gets little additional benefit at a tremendous cost.

The latest iteration of this tension came when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) floated the idea of requiring a negative COVID-19 test prior to domestic airline travel. USA TODAY reported that the CDC decided against moving forward: "At this time, CDC is not recommending required point of departure testing for domestic travel," the public health agency said in a statement. "As part of our close monitoring of the pandemic, in particular the continued spread of variants, we will continue to review public health options for containing and mitigating spread of COVID-19 in the travel space."

In thinking about this idea, the public health gains seem pretty minor. After all, there are many options for interstate travel – car, bus, train, etc. – that would not involve testing. The virus truly does not discriminate solely against air travel. Also, the airline manufacturers and airlines have made significant advances in air circulation, surface sanitation and operations to minimize risk of infection. The International Air Transport Association reports that there have been only 44 cases among 1.2 billion passengers, a rate of 1 case for every 27.3 million travelers. That suggests the underlying risk is quite low. It is also not obvious – at least to me – that there is anything near the daily testing capacity to support the demands by domestic air travelers.

The upshot is that there would seem to be considerable economic harm to the already-damaged airlines (and their supply chains), with little additional advantage in fighting the virus. Unless the case can be made that the opposite is true, the CDC should refrain from putting such a testing mandate in place.