

Everyday Epidemiology: How the pandemic brought science to the forefront of public consciousness

By **Eric M. Kraus** and **Lisa L. Smith**
Phillips Lytle LLP

Clinical trials.” “Co-morbidities.” “Datasets.” “Disease burden.” “Statistical significance.” “Peer-reviewed research.”

One of the most remarkable aspects of the ubiquitous media coverage of all things COVID-19 has been the introduction of epidemiologic and other scientific principles, and the role that epidemiologists have played on television and other popular media. Some seem to have become rock stars, bringing a better understanding of some of the considerations that evaluating epidemiologic studies require. The epidemiologists have been essential in translating how the virus was progressing, what studies showed about the safety and efficacy of evolving vaccines, and what information circulating on the internet was wrong and the reasons it was not trustworthy.



Eric M. Kraus
Partner



Lisa L. Smith
Partner

One of the most well-known epidemiologists, and a frequent contributor across many different media platforms, is Dr. Ashish Jha, Dean of the Brown University School of Public Health. Whether on ABC News, NBC Nightly News, MSNBC or in a conversation with Louie, the Muppet dad of Sesame Street’s Elmo, Dr. Jha can be seen seemingly every week providing helpful and epidemiology-driven information about the COVID-19 virus. He is not alone: Dr. Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota, Dr. Anne Rimoin of UCLA and others have taken on public roles in order to explain, from an epidemiologic perspective, how this infectious disease became a pandemic and the available tools to combat it.

Epidemiology and biostatistics have often played important roles in defending cases involving pharmaceutical products or medical devices. Understanding data about the relationship between a drug and a reported health effect often demonstrates that a claimed injury was nothing more than a coincidence. Our own experience certainly supports this – sound scientific principles have allowed us to prevail across a range of cases, from claims that vaccines cause autism to claims that medications cause birth defects, cancer or heart attacks. However, in the “old days” – before COVID-19 – if a case was not dismissed on a challenge to the epidemiologic principles regarding causation at an early stage of the litigation (before trial), it was often trial dogma that the lawyer who depended on complex epidemiologic principles to prevail in front of a jury had an uphill battle. Now, perhaps that has changed.

For better or for worse, we have all become amateur scientists in order to

process information about the pandemic (some more amateur than others). What this may mean for the future of defending pharmaceutical product liability claims is uncertain. Will our daily dose of epidemiology during COVID-19 result in a lay jury having an increased appetite for digesting some of the more difficult scientific concepts in order to get at the truth behind the validity of the claims? Or will jurors emerge from the pandemic skeptical of science, believing that it can be manipulated or that it cannot be trusted? Only time will tell, but the

increased understanding and fluency with principles of epidemiology should be a good thing for companies in the biomedical space who find themselves as defendants in personal injury litigation.

Eric M. Kraus is a partner at Phillips Lytle LLP and co-leader of the firm’s Life Sciences & Health Effects Practice. He focuses his practice on complex civil litigation matters, including mass torts and class actions involving pharmaceutical product and medical device liability, as well as toxic torts. He

can be reached at ekraus@phillipslytle.com or (212) 508-0408.

Lisa L. Smith is a partner at Phillips Lytle LLP and co-leader of the firm’s Life Sciences & Health Effects and Class Action Practices. She handles complex litigation across multiple jurisdictions, with a focus on the defense of pharmaceutical, chemical and other product liability cases, as well as environmental claims. She can be reached at lsmith@phillipslytle.com or (716) 847-8336.



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