Opinion

President should make wider use of war powers, now

America’s physicians are working with sub-standard personal protective equipment

By DAVID ENTWISTLE and RUSSELL HANCOCK | The Mercury News | Published: March 27, 2020

President Trump on Friday ordered GM to produce ventilators under the Defense Production Act. As hospitals brace for the rapid influx of patients we call on the president to harness industry to ramp up the production of personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing materials, as well.

Consider:

- Physicians throughout the country are functioning with sub-standard personal protective equipment (PPE). Some are wearing makeshift bandanas even though such “masks” offer little protection against viral pathogens like COVID-19.

- Evidence published in the New England Journal of Medicine indicates the virus can be aerosolized, surviving on surfaces for hours and sometimes days. Thus, when health care providers care for patients without sufficient protection they expose themselves — and their loved ones — to disease.

- There is substantial evidence that health care workers in Wuhan, China, Bergamo, Italy, and cities in United States have become ill, some of them dying from exposure to the virus.

- Every time a medical professional becomes symptomatic, even if she is not admitted to the hospital, she misses work for weeks and thus is not available to help at the time of our greatest need.

- Each infected health care worker can, while still asymptomatic, infect co-workers and patients, thus accelerating the spread of the pandemic among the very people who can least afford to get sick. Insufficient PPE transforms hospitals — which should be havens of safety — into hotbeds of contagion.

- Without sufficient testing it is impossible to know how many people are sick, where the virus has spread, and where to focus resources and prepare for surges in health care needs. Widespread availability of testing is one the pandemic’s most pressing needs and an area in which we have fallen well behind other nations.
The president’s conservative philosophy would have private industry and the states deal with these challenges. To be sure, many such efforts are under way. Here in Silicon Valley we have distilleries manufacturing hand sanitizer and tech companies using 3-D printing to churn out PPE. But these noble efforts aren’t going to achieve the capacity the crisis requires. The unfolding tragedy demands action on a massive — and therefore federal — scale.

Our nation is asking doctors, nurses and other health care heroes to put themselves at risk in a way that is every bit as real — and deadly — as if we were shipping them to war. They are ready to serve their country, but they cannot produce their own protective equipment. Only a mobilization effort at the president’s command will give them a fighting chance.

David Entwistle is the chief executive officer of Stanford Health Care and serves on the board of directors of Joint Venture Silicon Valley. Russell Hancock is the chief executive officer of Joint Venture Silicon Valley.