

Gov. Baker casts doubt on World Health Organization official's suggestion that asymptomatic coronavirus transmissions are 'very rare'

Posted Jun 09, 2020

226
shares

By [Steph Solis](#) | ssolis@masslive.com

Gov. Charlie Baker said he remains skeptical of a recent World Health Organization official's comments calling asymptomatic transmission of [COVID-19](#) rare.

The Republican governor was taking questions from the New Balance factory in Lawrence Tuesday morning when he was asked about the WHO study.

He paused for several seconds. Then he said, while he hasn't analyzed the most recent data, he read articles stating researchers drew their conclusions based on small sample sizes based on the contract tracing programs in other countries.

“I was on a call this morning with a bunch of folks from the health care community, almost all of whom basically said they were enormously skeptical of that conclusion for a whole bunch of reasons, and so am I,” Baker said.

Baker said antibody testing in Massachusetts shows high numbers of positive results for people who showed no symptoms. Anecdotes suggest asymptomatic employees at long-term care facilities inadvertently spread COVID-19 in those homes, and previously reported studies report the opposite of the recent WHO findings, he added.

Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, an epidemiologist who leads WHO's emerging diseases and zoonosis unit, said at a news briefing that reports from other countries where contact tracers are following asymptomatic cases suggest rare secondary transmission through carriers who show no symptoms.

“From the data we have, it still seems to be rare that an asymptomatic person actually transmits onward to a secondary individual,” Van Kerkhove said, per a [CNBC report](#). “It’s very rare.”

Van Kerkhove walked back those comments Tuesday, calling asymptomatic spread a “really complex question” that requires additional research to fully understand.

“I was responding to a question at the press conference. I wasn’t stating a policy of WHO or anything like that. I was just trying to articulate what we know,” she said on a live Q&A, according to [CNBC](#). “In that, I used the phrase ‘very rare,’ and I think that that’s misunderstanding to state that asymptomatic transmission globally is very rare. I was referring to a small subset of studies.”

Data suggesting asymptomatic transmissions prompted countries across the world to shut down businesses, government agencies and other areas of public life. Several states in the U.S., including Massachusetts, similarly shut down public life to stem the spread of the coronavirus, leading to the closure of K-12 schools, higher education

institutions and the cancellation of major public events such as the [Boston Marathon](#) and the [Boston Pops July 4 concert](#).

The Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program found a [“stunning” rate of COVID-19 transmissions](#) while tracing asymptomatic carriers stemming from an outbreak at Boston’s Pine Street Inn.

At a recent news conference, Baker was asked if he had any regrets or if he would do-over anything about his response to COVID-19. He said he wished he had realized sooner the prevalence of asymptomatic spread of the coronavirus.

Baker has cited studies pointing to high levels of COVID-19 transmission linked to asymptomatic carriers, which Van Kerkhove referenced as she clarified her remarks Tuesday. Studies show that about 16% of the population may be asymptomatic, while other models suggest as much as 40% of global transmission may be due to asymptomatic individuals.

He urged people to follow the advice and feedback of public health officials who questioned Van Kerkhove's initial statements.

"I continue to believe that, based on the advice that we're getting from the health experts here, that people who are asymptomatic who become symptomatic are absolutely capable of spreading the infection and so are many of the asymptomatic people who never show any symptoms at all," Baker said.

"No question, it's unprecedented. No question, we're learning about it as we go," he added. "No question, people are changing some of the guidance and the advisories based on information as it becomes available, but I am enormously skeptical of such a broad generalization about something where there is so much data and information already available that says just the opposite."