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Letter: An Epithet

- Robert F. Lyons, Kennebunk, Maine

Frank Bruni's "Death Came for the Dakotas" made for grim reading at the Sunday morning breakfast table. (New York Times, Dec. 6). The COVID-19 virus runs free as the Chinook winds on the prairies of my home state, South Dakota because of the "denial and defiance" of the governor.

Gov. Kristi Noem's dereliction of duty — no mask mandate or public health directives on social distancing — has created the spectacular "theater of American disgrace." More than 1,000 South Dakota residents have died of COVID-19 since March.

The story of Typhoid Mary comes to mind in reviewing the fatal consequences of Noem's failure to establish the basic parameters of public health precautions in face of this well-documented pandemic.

Mary worked as a cook in the homes of the wealthy in New York between 1900 and 1907. People fell sick or died in every home she worked in. In a case of what today we call "contact tracing," the family of one of the victims hired a researcher, George Soper, who tracked down Mary through her employment history.

Mary, although asymptomatic, was a super-spreader of typhoid. She is held responsible for at least 10 outbreaks that involved 51 cases, three resulting in deaths. When she refused medical treatment and confinement in a hospital, the New York Health Department quarantined her for life.

Typhoid had plagued America and nations of the world in the last century. Poor sanitation, contaminated food and infected water were largely responsible.

"Typhoid Mary" inspired the British humor magazine Punch to publish a satiric poem entitled "The Germ-Carrier" which read in part:

"Beneath her outside's healthy gloze

Masses of microbes seethe and wallow

And everywhere that MARY goes

Infernal epidemics follow."

"Typhoid Mary" is dictionary-defined as "one that is by force of circumstances a center from which something undesirable spreads."

That may become the epithet for the COVID-19 governor of South Dakota

