

UK doctors speak out on coronavirus pandemic

Our reporters
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Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two medical doctors on how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting Britain's National Health Service (NHS) and their concerns for the future.

One based in Wales warned, "With the available figures, it is going to be a serious disaster globally. I believe this could be minimised if all the modern scientific knowledge and resources are utilised methodically, although governments around the world do not want to spend enough money for this.

"The cuts to the NHS started with [Conservative prime minister] Thatcher's government in the 1980s, and they have continued and escalated.

"I work in a District General Hospital, in which we have only 12 ICU [intensive care] beds, which is not enough to cope with this type of a pandemic. Respiratory failure after viral pneumonia cannot be managed in normal wards or in high dependency units (HDU) because the patient needs to be intubated and artificial ventilation must be given.

"Rooms for patient isolation are very limited and nursing staff and junior doctors are also short in numbers, which has created big problems in the A&E department [Accident and Emergency].

"I reckon that the numbers of other staff such as phlebotomists, radiotherapists, health care workers and medical laboratory technicians cannot possibly cope with this type of a pandemic.

"So far there have only been a few positive tests for coronavirus in this area, but with numbers increasing exponentially, we won't be able to cope."

The doctor was asked about the statement by Sir Patrick Vallance, the government's chief scientific adviser, who said: "It's not possible to stop everyone getting it [Covid-19] and it's also not desirable because you want some immunity in the population to protect ourselves in the future."

He said of Vallance, "I totally disagree with this approach because the spread can be minimised. It is true that any viral infection produces a herd immunity, but it is not known whether it will be long lasting or not. For influenza virus, it lasts only for a few months and the next year you can get it even if you are vaccinated.

"Total lockdown for a few weeks will prevent the spread because there is no human contact. But this government does not want to do it, saying it will harm the economy. I wonder if some politicians may like killing the elderly and ill population for the future prospects of the economy."

Asked about the UK government's strategy of "containment, delay, research and mitigate," he answered, "I feel that they are going to fail at all these strategies due to poor commitment and the reluctance to spend funds on the public.

"The number of new cases and deaths are rising very rapidly. They may have to go to the 'mitigate' stage soon.

"Research is mainly done by the private sector whose main aim is to earn profits."

On the government's refusal to implement widespread testing, the doctor said, "I think that wider sections should be tested now to contain the pandemic. I wonder whether 111 [NHS helpline], the testing material and places to quarantine people will be able to cope. The crisis is far more critical than the government seems to think."

Asked whether the commitment made by the government in this month's budget of £65 million to develop a vaccine was enough, the doctor replied, "If the money is given to the private sector, this won't be enough for them because they want profits, not to help the public.

"The government has spoken of bringing in retirees to help in the existing crisis. There are already retirees working in the NHS due to the shortage of staff. The governments have been unable to train an adequate

number of nurses, doctors and health care workers. But they are vulnerable to the virus and have a higher probability of dying.

“Cultural events should be suspended and many workplaces and schools closed immediately to help stop the disease spreading. The government and employers must ensure that all families should be given benefits.

“Those who have only minimal symptoms still spread the disease. Children who get the disease at school will spread it at home to adults.

“They should reserve a much larger percentage of GDP for the health budget and cut off all the money reserved for national security, which is preparation for war, killing people. First, the wars should be ended, then only can the danger of global pandemics be tackled.”

A doctor, whose field is microbiology and infectious diseases, who works on the front line in a London NHS hospital told the WSWS, “We don’t know exactly how long this crisis will continue. The virus may circulate again next winter. It matters immensely how quickly we find an antiviral or a vaccine and how effective public health measures are.

“Hospitals should be preparing for a surge in cases. The number of people sick must not exceed the capacity of the health system. This depends on the number of doctors, nurses, scientists and the number of hospital/ICU beds, the availability of consumables [medical equipment]. Clearly, measured against each of these criteria the NHS is woefully inadequate.

“Modern governments need to have quickly expandable health care capacity. They should have effective public health surveillance systems. Patient contact should be minimized by having separate wards/ICU areas for infected patients. Personal protective equipment should be provided. Public transport should be minimized by working from home when it is appropriate.”



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