UK government’s herd immunity policy denounced by leading scientist

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In the last week, the UK has become the centre of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe. On Friday, a further 847 people were announced to have died in hospital, bringing the official death total to 14,576. The dead included the 76 year old former England soccer international, Norman Hunter, a member of the 1966 World Cup winning squad.

Boris Johnson’s Conservative government did nothing to prepare for the pandemic and instead pursued a policy of herd immunity—which envisaged the mass infection of tens of millions with COVID-19 and the deaths of possibly hundreds of thousands.

The policy was described in the most brutal terms, behind closed doors, at the end of February by Johnson’s key adviser, Dominic Cummings. According to the *Times*, some Tories present summarised his position as “herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad.”

Herd immunity had to be formally abandoned in March due to widespread opposition, including from Imperial College London scientists advising the government. However, it is becoming ever clearer that, aside from imposing a temporary lockdown to prevent the National Health Service (NHS) being overrun, the policy remains in place to this day.

On Friday, the herd immunity policy was denounced by Professor Anthony Costello whose criticisms make clear that nothing substantive, other than the lockdown, has ever been implemented. Costello is professor of international child health and director of the Institute for Global Health at the University College London. From 2015 to 2018, he was director of maternal, child and adolescent health at the World Health Organisation.

Speaking to the *Daily Telegraph* he said of the government’s response to COVID-19, “It is a total mess and we have been wrong every stage of the way. We have to change our policy and at the moment I don’t hear anything to suggest we are. They keep talking about flattening the curve which implies they are seeking herd immunity, but what we should have done is crush the epidemic and then keep it down.”

Costello warned that the UK would be forced—in the absence of any widespread testing regime—to succumb to eight to 10 waves of coronavirus before the population would be able to achieve “herd immunity.” His prognosis was based on statements by the government’s chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, that herd immunity required the infection of about 40 million of the UK’s 66 million population.

Costello warned, “The recent estimates, even from the chief scientific officer, is after this wave we could have only maybe 10–15 percent of the population infected. So the idea of herd immunity would mean another five, six waves, maybe, in order to get to 60 percent.”

Costello insisted, “We won’t get herd immunity if what the latest models show are correct.” He cited a study by Dutch scientists which found that just 3 percent of the Netherlands population acquired immunity as the pandemic reached its peak there; and research from UCL neuroscientist Professor Karl Friston who believes that on average just 6.4 percent of people in Europe will have acquired immunity—via their own naturally produced antibodies—by the end of the first lockdown phase.

Each wave would lead to mass deaths. Speaking to the House of Commons Health Select Committee yesterday, Costello said, “This [first] wave could see 40,000 deaths [in the UK] by the time it’s over.”

Given that the UK has already recorded nearly 15,000 deaths in hospital and estimates that there could easily be the same number of deaths outside of hospital, even

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the grim figures provided by Costello could be an underestimation.

Costello said that lockdown could not be successful if imposed as a stand-alone policy: “It should be combined with testing, tracing and digital apps that have been used so successfully in South Korea.” None of these policies have ever been implemented, even when promised repeatedly.

The government announced, just as the pandemic was taking hold in the UK, that there would be no more systematic testing, as everyone who had symptoms should stay at home and self-isolate. With people continuing to die in their hundreds, the Tories were forced to pledge 100,000 tests a day by the end of this month. They are still nowhere near the target.

Instead of population-wide testing, they claimed weeks ago that antibody tests to see who had contracted COVID-19, and then produced antibodies naturally to withstand it, was the way forward. Two million home test kits were purchased by the government from China for at least £16 million, which proved unreliable. Scientists are now saying that all such tests are inaccurate, and that immunity will not be achieved anyway due to virus mutations.

The transformation of exhibition centres in London, Birmingham and Manchester into Nightingale field hospitals has been a disaster. London’s 4,000 capacity Nightingale hospital received just 19 patients over the Easter weekend and had just 30 patients on Tuesday. They are incapable of treating COVID-19 patients with pre-existing conditions—who are the vast majority—and refuse to take them. Existing hospitals in London have been forced to double their own intensive care units, sacrificing other care facilities and even operating theatres, to deal with the catastrophe.

However, the more fundamental reason why hospitals have been able to cope without resort to the Nightingale facilities is because thousands of COVID-19 patients are dying in residential care homes or in their own homes. Government advice remains to stay home and self-isolate if you believe you have been infected with COVID-19. Many do so and limit themselves at best to contacting their GP or ringing the NHS 111 line. By the time some realise they have become dangerously ill and contact the NHS for help, it is already too late. Others delay contacting the NHS out of concern that they will place an unnecessary strain on the service, or due to fear that a trip to hospital will mean death anyway.

Among its most criminal actions is the government’s failure to keep the necessary stockpiles to provide health workers with the personal protective equipment (PPE) required to safely treat COVID-19 patients. This has led to mass infections and deaths of health workers, patients and other public workers. According to *Nursing Notes*, 61 medical workers were reported to have died as of Friday morning.

On Thursday, the Royal College of Nursing’s ruling council were warned that the National Health Service only has enough long-armed gowns—essential to treat coronavirus patients—to last for the next 48 hours.

Under conditions of acute crisis, with Johnson recovering from a brush with death after becoming a victim of his own policy, the government is unable to sanction immediately lifting the lockdown and forcing millions back to work—along the lines of a number of European governments and the Trump administration in the US. But such demands are being led by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who is demanding the government publish an “exit strategy” with schools reopening as a central component.

Any such move will be socially explosive. Millions of workers, having seen the mounting death toll and its devastating impact on the NHS, will simply refuse to return to work in unsafe conditions with their lives at stake in the midst of a pandemic.

According to the findings of a survey this week by the Office of National Statistics, over four in five adults in the UK (84.2 percent) said they were very worried or somewhat worried about the effect that the coronavirus is having on their life. Another poll by the Institute for Public Policy Research and YouGov found that nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of health workers were dissatisfied with government actions on prevention and testing. A massive 96 percent of the public wanted the government to go further with action to protect health and care workers.

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