UK: Weston General Hospital shuts due to coronavirus outbreak among staff

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The closure on Monday, due to a coronavirus outbreak, of Weston General Hospital in Weston-super-Mare, England is a devastating rebuttal of all government claims that the worst of the coronavirus pandemic is over.

The outbreak reveals the enormous dangers to the health and lives of National Health Service (NHS) workers.

Weston General Hospital serves a large population of 212,000 people in north Somerset and people needing medical care are being directed to other hospitals and facilities in the region.

On Monday, news broke that the hospital, including its A&E department, had closed its doors from 8 a.m. to new patients due to an outbreak of COVID-19 within the facility. This was initially reported as an outbreak among patients. The hospital issued a statement saying this was "a precautionary measure in order to maintain the safety of staff and patients in response to the high number of patients with Coronavirus in the hospital."

But this was only half the picture. It was revealed within hours by local press outlet *Somerset Live* that 40 percent of a "limited group of staff" who had come into contact with infected patients had tested positive for COVID-19, with around half of the cases asymptomatic. This information was based on information in an internal memo leaked by a staff member at the hospital.

On Monday afternoon, *Somerset Live* posted a story , "Testing of NHS staff at Somerset hospital reportedly reveals '40 percent as COVID-19 positive' as new admissions urgently halted." The memo also revealed, reported the outlet, that "the number of COVID-19 patients at the hospital has risen by nearly 100 percent since the beginning of last week."

The message reportedly sent out to NHS staff states that Weston General Hospital was reporting 64 inpatients as COVID-19 positive—an increase from 30 at the beginning of the week. The memo stated that when asymptomatic staff were tested, 40 percent were found to be COVID-19 positive.

The memo warned, "Discussions at CCG [Clinical Commissioning Group], regional and national level have all concluded that there is no mitigation that can be put in place to safely manage and maintain operations at Weston."

The hospital did not deny the existence of the memo, only stating, "There is an emerging picture of asymptomatic staff testing positive for the virus."

In the wake of the outbreak, a mobile testing unit appeared in a car park in Weston-super-Mare. The unit, managed by military personnel, is for pre-booked testing only and was expected to be there for a few days.

On Wednesday, the hospital issued further guidance including that all visits to patients were suspended, with exceptions to be made on compassionate grounds.

The same day, Robert Woolley, chief executive of University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust, said he did not know when the hospital would reopen, adding that it could be a week or longer. The hospital had to be closed, he said, "because we were seeing a stubbornly high level of infectious patients inside the hospital."

There would be a deep clean, with all inpatients to be tested, and the hospital was "testing all the staff who are working onsite because clearly a number are at home." The hospital employs around 2,000 staff.

Wooley downplayed the reported figures as being "taken out of context because it was [a] 40 percent [infection rate] of 10 percent of the most high-risk staff working in the COVID-19 infectious wards."

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Last week, Prime Minister Boris Johnson acknowledged that 312 NHS and social care workers had lost their lives due to COVID-19. This is one of the highest death rates in the world among health care workers. Among the deaths was Weston Hospital health care support worker Amarante Dias, who died from COVID-19 on April 13. His funeral was held April 24. There have been 118 confirmed COVID-19 patient deaths between Weston General and Bristol Royal Infirmary (BRI).

For years, there were warnings that the NHS would not be able to cope in a pandemic, with a chronic shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) a central factor. On Wednesday, the *Daily Mail* quoted a "source" at the Royal College of Nursing who said Weston had "has experienced issues over supplies" of PPE.

What caused the recent spike in infections at the hospital has not been established. But there can be no doubt that the government's incessant "back to work" mantra, relaxing of lockdown measures and general messaging that the pandemic is all but over have played a part.

North Somerset had a generally low incidence of coronavirus infections, with 406 in total, but over the last days this has escalated. As of Tuesday, 55 people had tested positive for the virus over the previous seven days—making up more than 50 percent of all new cases across the entire county of Somerset. Another sizable increase took place in Somerset West and Taunton, with 19 new infections and 247 in total.

Over the last few weeks of warm weather, thousands have flocked from other areas of the country to North Somerset's coastal towns and beaches, including Weston-Super-Mare, Clevedon and Portishead. Residents have pointed to other large gatherings such as those allowed by the government to mark VE Day. Rhiannon tweeted, "Two weeks ago for VE day weekend people piled onto the beach. It felt like lockdown had stopped … Now our hospital has had to stop admissions as there are so many cases of COVID."

The failure to adequately test and trace individuals with suspected symptoms led to the pandemic taking a grip across the country. While lockdown finally came into effect on March 23, key workers were still required to work. Without adequate testing and tracing in place, asymptomatic workers were spreading the virus.

Many NHS hospital staff will have unwittingly passed on the coronavirus due to there being no systematic testing for months. A recent study by Cambridge University researchers at Addenbrooke's Hospital showed 3 percent of a sample of 1,000 staff had tested positive for COVID-19, but had otherwise been fit to work. Based on the study's findings, it could mean as many as 15,000 staff nationwide still working would have tested positive for COVID-19 in April. Data released by NHS England this month found that up to a fifth of patients with COVID-19 in several hospitals contracted the disease while being treated in hospital for another illness.

The crisis at Weston hospital points to the immense dangers associated with the government's reckless ending of the lockdown, with nurseries and primary schools to begin opening from Monday.

The government's response to Weston's closure was of a piece with its indifference to the fate of millions embodied in its herd immunity policy. Speaking about the outbreak at the hospital during his appearance before Parliament's Liaison Committee on Wednesday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, "We will be working with the local outbreak committees, and those responsible for dealing with whatever happens locally and we will go through the local resilience forums which are leading on this … for instance, the other day you saw there was an outbreak in Weston-Super-Mare. We moved very quickly to close things down there to try to sort it out."

Johnson compared fighting the deadly virus to a child's game, declaring, "That is the kind of whack-a-mole tactics that we are going to use as we keep driving the virus down and keep reducing the incidents. It is very important that we have a very sensitive test, track and trace operation in order to cope with local outbreaks."

Johnson's hot air is meant to conceal the essential fact that there is no systematic testing operation in the UK, and, until yesterday and only if it works, not even a rudimentary track and trace system in place.

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