

Doctors warn National Health Service will be “overwhelmed” as Johnson scraps UK lockdown measures

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Scientists and public health experts have spoken out against the government’s premature lifting of lockdown restrictions, warning the National Health Service (NHS) will be overwhelmed by a second wave of coronavirus infections this winter.

Dr. Alison Pittard, dean of the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine, said the NHS would be “overwhelmed” if another surge in COVID-19 combines with the annual flu season, placing pressure on a public health system already stretched to the breaking point.

“We still have COVID patients in intensive care. If the public don’t physically distance and don’t wear face coverings, we could very quickly get back to where we were earlier this year.”

Professor Carrie MacEwen, chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, echoed these warnings. “If we get a second surge it could be bigger than the last one...it could damage the NHS in the long-term, especially with the backlog [of surgery] and flu. Going into winter the situation is much bleaker and against a background of economic disaster. The public has begun to think we are free of this, but we are not.”

MacEwen told the *Guardian* that doctors are now completely reliant on the public to control the virus. This is because the Johnson government is openly defying scientific advice that strict social distancing is still needed.

On Friday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson scrapped the last remaining planks of national lockdown measures introduced on March 23. Employers will be able to order staff to stop working from home from August 1, pushing millions into crowded transport and workplaces. Football matches and other “super-spreader” events will also resume, while schools will reopen in September.

Johnson claimed the UK would be “back to normality”

by Christmas, cherry-picking statistics to create a false narrative of national recovery. At last Friday’s press conference he cited a decline in UK COVID-19 deaths since their peak in April, but this was achieved thanks to the lockdown measures the government has now lifted as it drives millions back to work to protect the profits of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

Professor Christina Pagel, professor of Operational Research at University College London, told an Independent SAGE online briefing Friday that the rate of new infections in the UK had flatlined. There were 642 new COVID-19 cases that day, the same number as the previous Friday, “So, although new cases were [previously] declining, that decline has definitely now stopped.”

International experience showed it would take four to five weeks, Pagel explained, before the result of eased lockdown restrictions would be seen. This means the impact of the July 4 reopening of pubs and restaurants, for example, has not yet been felt. “Over the next two to three weeks we really need to keep an eye on new confirmed cases,” she said.

Last Friday, Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced that daily publication of new infections and deaths from COVID-19 was being “paused” due to “statistical anomalies.” The sinister move means that information charting infections and deaths in England has not been published for more than five days, right at the point where the government’s back-to-work measures are in full swing.

Hancock’s claim to have suddenly discovered “anomalies” in the way COVID-19 deaths are recorded in England is bogus. Explanatory text was already included on Public Health England’s (PHE) website, pointing to different calculations employed in England, Scotland,

Wales and Northern Ireland. PHE statistics are generated by reporting all deaths among patients previously diagnosed with COVID-19. The lack of any cut-off date between infection and death means PHE's figures might sometimes include patients who died for other reasons, thus "exaggerating" the death toll. But Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland's 28-day cut-off minimises the death toll—a problem that causes no concern for Hancock.

On July 7, scientists in Independent SAGE published a report, "Zero COVID-19: Why is England not pursuing an elimination strategy?" It found the government had "consistently failed to heed broad-based scientific advice, including that from the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control."

The scientists opposed statements by Sir Chris Whitty, the government's chief medical officer, who supported the Johnson government's "phased" reopening of the economy while predicting on June 23 that "a significant amount of coronavirus" would still be circulating the following spring—equating to a minimum death toll of 25,000. Independent SAGE responded, "a death toll from COVID-19 of this magnitude is not only preventable but is absolutely unacceptable."

To eliminate the virus, scientists say the infection rate must be reduced to one new case per million people each day. But on Friday, Pagel explained that in England, the number of new cases per million had risen to 10. The R-rate, which the government previously said must stay below 1.0 to prevent exponential growth, has risen to 1.0 in almost every area.

NHS Track and Trace—contracted to private companies including Serco—is in shambles. It has failed to deliver on the 80 percent contact success rate the government's own scientific advisers say is needed to isolate new cases and reduce the overall rate of infection. Sunday's outbreak at a Sitel contact tracing call centre in Lanarkshire, Scotland, symbolises the ineptitude and greed of a system that operates at the direct expense of public health. The pandemic is being seized on to further privatise and dismantle the NHS.

On Monday, the *Guardian* reported that contact tracing in England's poorest local authorities reaches fewer people than in wealthy areas. "In Blackpool, 37% of people who had been in close contact with an infected person were not reached by the system. This compares with 9% in Cheshire East, which includes the affluent towns of Knutsford and Wilmslow." People in the poorest parts of the UK are already more than twice as likely to die from COVID-19 compared to people living in rich

areas.

There is overwhelming public opposition to lifting the lockdown. A *Sky News* poll published July 3 found that 83 percent of respondents would support a second lockdown to stop a second spike in infections. Support was uniform across all age groups, with just 6 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds saying they would oppose a second lockdown, compared with 4 percent of people aged 65 and over.

Polling took place on June 29–30, just one week after the Johnson government announced the reopening of pubs and restaurants, urging the population to "go out and enjoy yourselves." But 70 percent of people said they would not go to a pub or cinema, 71 percent said they would not use public transport, and 73 percent said they would not feel comfortable taking an overseas holiday. An overwhelming majority also support compulsory use of face masks, with 91 percent of respondents saying they should be worn on public transport and 80 percent supporting compulsory use in shops.

Against the progressive instincts of class solidarity shown by millions of workers who fought for national lockdown measures to save lives, the homicidal outlook of the ruling class was summed up over the weekend by Johnson in an interview he gave to the *Telegraph*.

Discussing his government's "transformative agenda," he confirmed there would be no second national lockdown. "I can't abandon that tool any more than I would abandon a nuclear deterrent. But it is like a nuclear deterrent, I certainly don't want to use it. And nor do I think we will be in that position again."

For Johnson and the ruling class, the threat of Armageddon arises not from the threat to the lives of millions of people, but from the loss of profits caused by socially necessary public health measures. There could be no clearer argument for socialism. Capitalism must be overthrown by the working class and replaced by a globally planned socialist economy, deploying scientific knowledge and resources to protect the world's people.



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