

New COVID-19 variant fuels surge in UK and Ireland

Robert Stevens
12 January 2021

The UK's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, issued a chilling statement Monday: "The next few weeks are going to be the worst weeks of this pandemic in terms of the numbers into the NHS [National Health Service]."

Whitty spoke two days after the UK passed the grim milestone of 80,000 COVID-19 deaths, as lab-confirmed cases hit more than three million. Saturday's 1,035 deaths took the total to 80,868, according to the government's measure of people who have died within 28 days of a positive Covid test.

In the past three weeks, the UK and Ireland have exceeded the per capita daily new case count in the United States, fueled by the new variant of COVID-19 known as B.1.1.7.

Scientists in the US and globally have warned that this surge is a bellwether for the rest of the world. "I've never seen an epi curve like this," said former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Dr. Tom Frieden. "The B.1.1.7 variant is spreading like wildfire in the UK and Ireland. If it spreads here, it will make an already bad situation even worse."

The true figure of COVID deaths is almost 100,000. Figures published Saturday by the statistics agencies in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for deaths where COVID-19 has been mentioned on the death certificate—including data on deaths over recent days—showed there have been 95,000 deaths involving COVID-19 in Britain.

Monday's 529 fatalities brought the new official death toll to 81,960, and the real figure above 96,000. Sometime this week the UK will pass 100,000 deaths. There have been another 46,169 positive cases reported, even with the weekend lull, bringing the total cases to 3,118,518.

London and the south east of England are the epicentre of the pandemic, but it is raging throughout the country. On Monday, NHS England leader Sir Simon Stevens said that a quarter of coronavirus admissions to hospital are for

people under the age of 55. Testifying before Parliament's public accounts committee, he stated, "In London perhaps one in 30 people has the coronavirus, in parts of London it may be twice that number. If you look across other regions of England the issue is that coronavirus is once again on the rise. In Merseyside in just the last week there has been a further 50 percent increase in the number of COVID hospitalisations."

Speaking to BBC Radio's *Today* programme, Whitty pointed out that the new strain of coronavirus, first detected in Kent, south east England is now the dominant strain. The "current new variant is transmitted exactly the same way, but the probability of transmission with any interaction has now gone up with this new variant, which is now for much of the country the dominant variant."

"This new variant is really pushing things in a way that the old variant, which was already very bad, was not able to. So we have a very significant problem... this is a serious problem and it is rising in every part of England."

The national lockdown that came into place last week is far more limited than that in operation in the few months from March 23 last year, and is leading to a surge in infections.

Around 10 million people are classed as "key workers" and are working as usual. But the government is insisting that millions of other workers, who are the parents of nursery pupils, also go to work. Primary and secondary schools have moved to remote learning for most pupils, but companies nationally are insisting that parents still turn up for work.

Last Friday, the *Guardian* reported a survey by the Teacher Tapp app finding that "one in six primary schools in England reported that 30 percent or more of their normal roll was attending in person this week, far more than in the first week of the March lockdown." Citing comments from head teachers that schools are "rammed" with pupils, it noted, "Nationally the figures would equate

to more than 2,500 primary schools in England, with a third or more of their pupils in their classrooms. More than 300 of those schools said at least half of all their pupils attended in person.”

The government and media have pumped out a stream of propaganda blaming the population for breaking lockdown regulations and causing the spread of the virus.

Even as he warned of how rapidly the mutation is spreading a deadly disease, including noting that over 30,000 people are now in hospital with COVID-19, compared to the peak of 18,000 in April, Whitty said, “it’s individual choices that matter more than rules at this stage of the game.”

This is a libel against the population aimed at whitewashing a homicidal herd immunity policy that has been followed by Boris Johnson’s government since the beginning of the pandemic. His claims are belied by images of transport hubs, including London’s main railway stations, that are empty for most of the day, with workers using transport services only to go to and return from work.

The only measures ever put in place by the government to restrict transmission, including its lockdown last March, were carried out because it was forced to do so by millions of workers. The latest closures of schools were carried out only because educators and staff would have walked out en masse otherwise.

Nurseries and Special Educational Needs schools remain fully open during the current lockdown to ensure that the parents of children in these settings can continue churning out profits for the corporations. Children, mainly from poorer families and unable to learn remotely due to not having electronic devices, a wifi connection or space to study, are forced to attend lessons face-to-face.

Whitty even admitted that having parents in work, not at home looking after children, was the main rationale. “I think that the reason that nursery schools are open is to allow people who need to go to work or need to do particular activities to do so, and we all do know that children are at very, very low risk of this virus relative to other ages... The fact that nurseries are open, it’s not a risk to the children.” Whitty’s comments that nurseries are safe is a lie, with Johnson admitting last week that schools are vectors of transmission of the virus.

Hospitals nationally are being over-run by a massive influx of COVID patients, with the *Financial Times* noting on Monday that “UK hospitals are some of the fullest in Europe with COVID-19 patients...” This is made worse by the growing army of health care workers struck

down by the virus or having to self-isolate when family members test positive. The chair of the British Medical Association, Chaand Nagpaul, wrote last week, “There are over 46,000 hospital staff off sick with COVID-19,” and that this was “heaping additional pressure on an already overstretched workforce struggling to manage even current critical care demand.”

The *Guardian* reported Saturday: “Across the country hospitals, GP surgeries and care homes are reporting abnormally high staff absence levels. In Kent, one of the hardest hit areas of south-east England, about 25 percent of clinical and administrative staff are believed to be absent. John Allingham, medical director of the local medical committee, which represents GPs in the county, said in some practices as many as half of staff were absent, which was having an impact on vaccinations.”

The government is trumpeting the opening of seven mass vaccination centres this week, even as it admits that all adults will not have been offered a vaccine until the autumn—a claim no one should believe. One of the seven is located at Epsom Downs Racecourse in Surrey. Yet just over five miles away in Leatherhead, 170 bodies are being kept in the temporary mortuary at Headley Court. The Surrey Local Resilience Forum, reported the *Guardian*, said that half of those kept at the facility died from COVID-19. The bodies are being stored in the temporary facility, as “The county’s hospital mortuaries have the capacity to store 600 bodies but are currently full, while the temporary facility has room for 800.”

The government still refuses to implement any serious measures of containment. Yesterday, Secretary of Health Matt Hancock fronted a press conference in which he urged people to “follow the rules”, called for supermarkets to insist on mask wearing by customers, and made a vague statement that the government was “not afraid” to tighten the rules. Stephen Powis, national medical director of NHS England, admitted that the “significant and sustained pressure” on hospitals was taking place when we are “yet to see” the impact of the loosening of restrictions at Christmas.



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