Britain's National Health Service faces disaster as Omicron surges

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Doctors, nurses and health workers are warning that the National Health Service (NHS) could soon be totally overwhelmed because the Johnson government is allowing the Omicron variant to rip through the population so as not to interrupt the flow of Christmas profits.

The number of new infections in the UK Tuesday again surged to over 90,000 (90,629). The *Daily Mail* reported yesterday that on December 15, according to backdated government figures, case numbers topped 100,000 for the first time. The real number will be much higher due to the constraints of testing capacity.

Since the detection of Omicron, total COVID cases have risen from around 10 million to more than 11.5 million in little over three weeks. The 579,428 cases recorded in the last week represent a 63 percent increase over the 358,200 over the previous week.

Cities such as London, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow are seeing cases of the far more transmissible Omicron variant rising exponentially atop already high numbers of the Delta strain. Modelling by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) found that between 3,000 and 10,000 people a day could be hospitalised if the government did not immediately implement further public health measures.

On top of the devastating impact of increasing hospitalisations, an analysis by the British Medical Association (BMA), based only on current case numbers and trends, found that even in the best scenario more than 32,000 staff could be absent through sickness by December 25. The worst-case scenario sees almost 130,000 NHS workers off sick, 10 percent of the workforce, not including those who were self-isolating due to another household member having COVID19.

BMA Council Chair, Dr. Chaand Nagpaul, said the estimated levels of staff absences "would be truly devastating, leading to an inability to provide even some of the most urgent care."

The situation in the nation's capital, London, is already disastrous. The *Health Service Journal* (HSJ) reported Monday that the NHS in London was "likely to be overwhelmed" by early January, according to a leaked document from NHS London.

Health services in the capital were "again facing significant operational pressure as a result of the current surge in covid-19 cases from the new variant of concern, Omicron," the document states. Citing recent modelling, "it is predicted that the London Ambulance Service (LAS), Emergency Departments (EDs) and the General and Acute (G&A) bed base are likely to become overwhelmed due to rising covid demand in the next 2-3 weeks."

Lisa Elliott, Royal College of Nursing (RCN) regional director for London, said, "We should not underplay how catastrophic it could potentially be," telling ITV News the situation was "very worrying."

Days ago, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan declared a "major incident" in the capital as a result of the surge in coronavirus cases. This is the first time this has been invoked since the height of the pandemic last winter. Khan reported that the Omicron variant now accounted for 80 percent of all new cases and was seriously impacting staff absences in the emergency service across London.

Last week, Glen Burley, Chief executive of three NHS trusts in Coventry and Warwickshire, told the *Independent*, "We've got a situation where sickness levels are higher than they have ever been because of Covid and it's a time of year when sickness levels are always higher…"

The current sickness rate across the three hospitals was already at a staggering 7 percent, almost double the usual rate of around 3.5 to 4 percent.

On Merseyside, Dr Nikki Stevenson, Medical Director

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at the Arrow Park Hospital, told Planet Radio “Staffing is our biggest worry. Trying to make sure we've got sufficient staff is one of our main areas of focus…”

The government’s reaction to the concerning levels of staff off sick is to remove isolation requirements for those NHS staff who have been in contact with the Omicron variant. As has been the government's stance throughout the pandemic, healthcare workers are essentially expendable.

The NHS staff left to cope as their colleagues succumb to coronavirus face intolerable conditions. Patricia Marquis, Royal College of Nursing (RCN) England director, said the present situation was “catastrophic, there is no doubt about it.”

“The workforce is already short, the workforce is already exhausted–mentally and physically” she told BBC’s *The World This Weekend* .

Even before the impact of Omicron, bed occupancy was at a dangerous 94 percent in England, with four in five critical care beds already full. Some hospitals already have no free beds. For example, every day between December 6 and 12, Dorset County Hospital, George Eliot Hospital, Portsmouth Hospitals University, Royal United Hospitals Bath and Sherwood Forest Hospitals were all at 100 percent occupancy.

Data provided by the NHS highlights each day of the last week in November, there were on average 10,500 people occupying beds that were medically fit to leave, amounting to one in every 10 beds. The growing crisis in the social care sector means that such patients, who could be discharged, must stay in hospital as their local authority is unable to provide the necessary home support.

Some hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments have had to effectively close their doors as they were too full to accept further patients. This occurred on 28 separate occasions in the week of December 6, with ambulances redirected to other nearby hospitals.

Dr Ian Higginson, vice president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, told the BBC, “Emergency departments are full and with no beds to move patients into ambulances are being held outside and unsafe handover delays are becoming normalised rather than being seen for the failure that they represent.

While patients should normally be transferred within 15 minutes, in the week of December 6, almost one in four took over half an hour, whilst one in 10 (8,401 people) took over an hour—almost double the same period last year 2020.

University Hospitals Birmingham reported the highest number of delays with 472 patients waiting more than 60 minutes before being transferred from an ambulance. Portsmouth Hospitals University was next with 354 delays, followed by University Hospitals of North Midlands with 320 delays.

The Association of Ambulance Chief Executives managing director Martin Flaherty told the BBC, “The extent of potential harm that is being caused to patients when there are lengthy delays remains a significant and growing problem.”

In October, Conservative government Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Sajid Javid said he thought the pressures faced by the NHS were “not unsustainable”. It has taken less than two months to expose his lies.

Rather than implement any serious public health measures to halt the spread of COVID, such as closing inessential businesses while providing full recompense to workers and the self-employed, the Tory government advocates an essentially “vaccination only” approach. However, as many leading scientists and doctors have shown, the pandemic cannot be curbed through vaccines alone.

A peer-reviewed paper published in *The Lancet* Monday found that COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness was decreasing, with two doses being insufficient to offer protection against Omicron. The latest government figures for the UK show that just under 30 million people have received the required three doses, while only 47 million have received two doses. This leaves millions dangerously susceptible to infection from both the Delta and Omicron variants, including many children.

NHS FightBack and the Socialist Equality Party call on healthcare workers to take matters into their own hand and build rank-and-file safety committees, as well as participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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