UK National Health Service overwhelmed as COVID surge escalates

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A staggering 3.7 million people were infected with COVID in Britain in the last week of 2021, according to the Office for National Statistics latest estimate. This was an increase of around 60 percent from the 2.3 million in the week to December 23.

Against all claims that Omicron could be controlled by the government's minimal "Plan B" measures, one in 15 people in England and one in 10 in London were infected. In Scotland and Wales, one in 20 people had the virus, and in Northern Ireland one in 25.

Even these figures are an underestimate as they only include those living in private households, not cases in hospitals, care homes and other settings. There is a resident population of almost 500,000 highly vulnerable elderly people in care homes alone.

The UK is now recording well over a million COVID cases a week. Following the record near 220,000 announced Tuesday, another 194,747 were announced Wednesday.

Deaths remain constantly high with another 343 announced yesterday. Most of these were in England, with the 314 deaths NHS England compiled from four days of data after delays over the New Year. Figures published by the Office for National Statistics show there have now been 174,000 deaths registered in Britain where Covid was mentioned on the death certificate.

The lie that Omicron is a mild variant is exposed by the rapid increase in hospitalisations. As of January 4, there were 17,276 people in hospitals nationwide with COVID, a rise of over 5 percent. This figure did not include data from Wales and Northern Ireland. Nearly 1,000 (911) are seriously ill requiring ICU beds.

As a result of the surge, hospitals face record numbers of staff absences. On New Year's Eve, one in 10 National Health Service (NHS) staff were absent, including 50,000 either ill or isolating with COVID. This situation worsened drastically in the first days of January, with NHS trusts around the country serving hundreds of thousands of people declaring "critical incidents".

By Monday evening, six NHS trusts had declared critical incidents. By Tuesday night, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced to admit that several trusts were "at least temporarily overwhelmed", this had risen to at least 12.

Yesterday Downing Street confirmed that more than 20 hospital trusts have declared critical incidents over COVID. This includes University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Trust and Blackpool Teaching Hospitals, responsible for sites across Lancashire including Blackpool Victoria Hospital, Fleetwood Hospital, Clifton Hospital, Morecambe Bay, Westmorland General Hospital, the Royal Lancaster Infirmary and Furness General.

Aaron Cummins, chief executive of University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay told staff via Twitter that sickness absence had risen from seven to 10 percent over the last week, equivalent to 240 missing staff. Dr Sakthi Karunanithi, public health director for Lancashire, told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme the county was bracing "for a tsunami of Omicron cases".

At Great Western Hospital in Swindon, chief executive Kevin McNamara reported more than 180 staff were off sick with COVID-19, while patients faced delays due to the high demand for beds. "Our Covid inpatient numbers are currently at 67 patients confirmed or suspected—an 81 percent increase, from 37 on Christmas Eve. We always knew that January would be a tough month for everyone, and our modelling shows that it is likely to get tougher in the next few weeks," he told the local press.

University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust, including Derriford Hospital and the Royal Eye Infirmary, declared a critical incident Tuesday. Chief operating officer Jo Beer messaged that with nearly 500 absences, staff had been redeployed to manage the increasing pressures.

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Rising ambulance demand meant A&E departments were now at full capacity.

United Lincolnshire Hospitals earlier declared a critical incident affecting four hospitals. Its sites were unable to maintain safe staffing levels, which had led to "compromised care". Absences due to illness or quarantining with Covid-19 doubled in the month before Christmas, with 150 staff isolating on Boxing Day.

At least 17 hospitals in Greater Manchester, an area with a population of 3 million, were forced to pause non-urgent surgery and outpatient appointments Tuesday due to rising COVID cases and staff absences. By Wednesday, all non-urgent surgery was paused at every hospital in the conurbation. Yesterday, the *Manchester Evening News* reported, "Nearly one in four patients [in local hospitals] outside of ICU have Covid, with 96pc of beds occupied. Normally hospitals aim for no more than around 85pc."

In the north east, four hospitals have suspended adult visiting, affecting County Durham and Darlington, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland, and North Tees and Hartlepool. Staff absences have shot up by 135 percent due to COVID since December 24.

The true number of trusts and hospitals declaring a critical incident is likely to be much higher as NHS England has not revealed which trusts have only reported these internally without making any public statement.

In Scotland, Covid-related absences among NHS staff are at their highest since March 2021, running at an average of 3,316 each day. Those affected include 1,765 nursing and midwifery staff, 65 medical and dental staff, and 1,466 other staff.

In Wales, the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board said staff absences due to the rise in Covid cases has meant cutting services. It asked people in the Gwent region only to attend hospital if they were "absolutely desperate". Opening hours at the Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr minor injuries unit were cut due to staff shortages.

In Northern Ireland, nearly 4,000 NHS staff were absent last week due to Covid, where there were 30,000 confirmed cases in four days across the new year.

Despite a growing mass of evidence that the population faces a grave danger, a compliant media is doing everything to play down the crisis. BBC health correspondent Nick Triggle plays a key role spreading propaganda in support of herd immunity. After Johnson's declared Tuesday that his government would "ride out this Omicron wave without shutting down our country once again," Triggle said the government's opposition to further lockdowns was correct, claiming that they did not stop the spread of the virus but merely delayed it.

Triggle cited a study by Warwick University, produced for the government, which found that to have impacted the current growth of infections due to Omicron, any lockdown would have to have been implemented on December 26 or earlier. It was now "largely too late to have an impact on the peak of cases and hospitalisations," he asserted. This is justifying today's swinishness with yesterday's. Neither Triggle or any other journalist was advocating a lockdown on December 26, despite Omicron having been in circulation for a month by then and known to be far more transmissible than any other variants. They all faithfully echoed, albeit without the crudity, Johnson's October 2021 statement that there should he "no more f**king lockdowns".

The real motivation behind opposition to a lockdown and the required closure of schools is that it will cut-across the interest of the money-mad capitalist class and super-rich. This is what Triggle means when he states that although a lockdown could help the NHS, this "had to be balanced against the cost to the economy".

In the absence of such vital measures, infections will inevitably rise even further, producing more hospitalisations and deaths.

Nothing serious is being done to prevent the collapse of the NHS. Instead, the government is responding to an unprecedented staffing crisis by relaxing quarantining and testing requirements!

The UK Health Security Agency has announced that from January 11, it is no longer necessary to confirm a positive lateral flow test with the more accurate PCR test. In such cases, the individual must self-isolate, but can return to work after seven days (rather than 10 as previously) if they can demonstrate two further negative lateral flow tests on days six and seven.

The WSWS urges all NHS and social care workers to contact us with their experiences. For more information, visit NHS FightBack and share your experiences of the pandemic and conditions at work.

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