

BBC lays out what “Learning to live with the virus in the UK” means

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On Sunday, the BBC published the national broadcaster’s latest state of the nation pandemic piece, written by health editor Hugh Pym.

“Learning to live with the virus in the UK”, informed by government propaganda on the one hand and by serious science on the other, is an article at war with itself. Uncritically citing official policy, “Ministers have told the public they need to live with coronavirus and treat it like flu”, it goes on to set out in as muted terms as possible the key reasons why this is such criminal strategy, without ever drawing that conclusion.

Under the heading, “Risk of the virus”, the article notes, “Covid can still kill”, before stressing that “the chances of getting seriously ill and not surviving are much lower than in earlier waves.”

“Pressure on the NHS [National Health Service] has eased,” Pym writes, but notes that “the number of patients with Covid in hospital” is still “about 11,000 compared with more than 20,000 in early April.”

The devil is in the unprovided detail. Despite the reduced ratio of deaths to infections, a comparable number of people have been killed in the Omicron wave to the earlier Delta wave—over a much shorter period of time and with higher levels of vaccination. Breaking COVID deaths down by different waves of infection, the Independent SAGE group reports 18,350 Delta deaths and 16,000 Omicron deaths to April 22.

As for “eased” pressure on the NHS, the figure of 11,000 patients with COVID is roughly nine times higher than the number a year ago. The normalisation of this demand on the health service has driven it to the point of collapse.

These figures are the product of the unprecedented spread of COVID in recent months. Pym states that the government’s “message is to stay off work or away from vulnerable people if you have symptoms”. This is nonsense.

Financial Times t(FT), ~~the~~ findings of a YouGov survey, “only 55 per cent of people in England were aware they should avoid contact with vulnerable people if they have Covid, and just 63 per cent realised they should work from home if they have symptoms.”

This is entirely down to the government’s relentless insistence on “living with COVID” and minimisation of even the most inadequate, face-saving “guidance”. To this must be added the immense financial pressures to come into work, and the impossibility of avoiding vulnerable people in crowded houses.

The real meaning of the government’s policy is there for all to see in the repeated surges of infections since “Freedom Day”. An analysis by the FT of infection surveys puts the proportion of people in England who have at some stage been infected at close to 90 percent, having shot up from around 50 percent this January.

Infections are now falling rapidly, due to a combination of the warmer weather meaning more time spent outside and the increased levels of immunity in the population from the swathe of recent infections. As ever, this is being used by the familiar crowd of right-wing reactionaries and pseudo-scientists who tout government policy as an opportunity to declare the pandemic (for the fourth or fifth time) as good as over.

Reality proves the opposite. The BBC article notes, “The return of people from holidays to work and study after summer holidays, and the onset of cooler autumnal weather could create conditions for another uptick in infections.

“More immediately, new strains of the Omicron variant could cause problems.”

It quotes Imperial College London’s Professor Peter Openshaw who explains, “Everyone is thinking of sub-variants—we just don’t know whether they will cause a surge in infections and where they will go in the UK.”

Two subvariants, BA.4 and BA.5, currently driving a new wave of infections in South Africa, are present and showing initial signs of growth in the UK.

The BBC also references Professor Mike Tildesley from the University of Warwick warning, in the broadcaster's words, "the next two to five years will be uncertain."

What will those years look like? As Pym admits, a new variant of the virus "is the possibility which makes experts nervous... there is no guarantee it will be milder than Omicron." The BBC then fudges the point, citing Professor Paul Hunter to argue "it is unlikely that a new killer variant will suddenly materialise" and his belief, given vaccines, that "we will see less severe disease". The opposed possibility is not discussed.

In addition to this future danger, the current variants already pose a serious risk to large numbers of vulnerable people, primarily the 600,000 severely immunosuppressed across the UK.

Professor of immunology at the University of Birmingham Alex Richter told the FT the government's COVID strategy amounted to a "game of Russian roulette" for these people. The BBC chooses to reference Gemma Peters, chief executive of Blood Cancer UK, to make the patronising point that "ministers and NHS leaders could do more to reassure" the vulnerable.

They could begin by protecting them instead! Just 46 percent of severely immunocompromised people are fully jabbed. More than 10 percent have had two or fewer doses.

A study carried out in Canada published last week found that pregnant women are also at increased risk 5.46 times more likely to be admitted to intensive care with COVID and 2.65 times more likely to be hospitalised than similar-aged women. Infection during pregnancy increased the risk of preterm birth by 63 percent.

Again, this vulnerable group has been left under-protected. Of the just over half a million women who gave birth in 2021, a shocking four in five had not received a vaccine at the time.

The findings from Canada speak to the broader harms of COVID still being uncovered by scientific research. Teams at the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London recently found a severe case of COVID could cause cognitive degeneration equivalent to 20 years of ageing. Investigations are ongoing into possible links between prior COVID infection and a sharp increase in cases of hepatitis among children.

What is known for certain but suppressed in the media and government announcements is the terrible burden of

Long COVID. According to the latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures, released last Friday, 1.8 million people (2.8 percent of the population) were suffering the debilitating condition as of April 3. Nearly 800,000 had been experiencing symptoms for a year or more and nearly a quarter of a million for more than two years.

The BBC presents these figures with the introduction, "Case numbers have fallen sharply, but however low they get there will always be a small proportion with symptoms which last more than a few weeks, and sometimes many months." It cites University College London Professor Christina Pagel as saying, "estimates suggesting 5% of those who have been jabbed and then get the virus will go on to get long Covid are concerning."

In fact, as Pagel has tweeted, around 8-9 percent even of triple vaccinated people report Long COVID symptoms at least four weeks after their first infection, with most reporting activity-limiting symptoms. Data is still being collected on the rates for subsequent infections.

The BBC, along with the corporate media, the Labour Party and the trade unions, helped to propagate the myths used by the government to enforce its "living with COVID" strategy. Now fully in place, its disastrous implications are exposing the lies used to justify it. The working class is being brought face-to-face with the consequences of persistent infection, illness and death caused by a virus allowed to spread freely by the ruling class. It can only rid itself of this disease with a political fight to implement its own policy for the suppression and eventual elimination of COVID-19.



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