

nously that “if the disease becomes established in the UK . . . it may be that widespread exposure in the UK is inevitable”.

Officially, the country was still in the “contain” phase in which the contacts of anyone who had contracted the virus would be tracked down and tested. But that battle had been lost. Such was the rapid spread of the virus that it had almost certainly reached one of Johnson’s own ministers, Nadine Dorries, the health minister, who would start to go down with symptoms two days later.

Given that widespread exposure appeared highly likely, it would have been possible to have moved on swiftly to the delay strategies outlined in the document, which included: “school closures, encouraging greater home working, reducing the number of large-scale gatherings”. But, according to the document, the government was planning to weigh up the trade-off between the “social and economic impact” of such measures and “keeping people safe”. It decided to wait. And wait.

True to form, the prime minister was in a characteristically upbeat mood when he presented the action plan at the first of his daily press conferences on March 3 flanked by two doctors who were to become household names. Likeable, earnest and articulate Professor Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, and Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, would

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be used as the government’s human proof that it was “following the science”.

Johnson told the journalists sitting shoulder to shoulder in the wood-panelled No 9 Downing Street room that the coronavirus was “overwhelmingly a disease that is moderate in its effects” before repeating his misplaced faith in the UK’s testing and surveillance systems. “This country is going to get through coronavirus, no doubt at all, and get through it in good shape,” he added.

The prime minister said the plan was not a list of actions the government “will do” but rather what it “could do at the right time”. He said: “Our plan means we are committed to doing everything possible based on the advice of our world leading scientific experts to prepare for all eventualities.”

SAGE ADVICE

It has now emerged that earlier that same day some of those world-leading scientists had presented data to a Sage meeting showing the alarming consequences of the mitigation measures being proposed by the government. The renowned pandemic modelling

teams from Imperial College London and LSHTM had been asked to assess the effects of strategies to mitigate the virus such as social distancing, school closures, household isolation and banning mass gatherings. Their findings were a stark warning to the government about the policy it was pursuing.

If there were no interventions, there could be as many 500,000 deaths. But the figures were still frightening when they factored in the mitigation measures. The teams both found that no matter how they modelled the measures — singly or in combination — the death toll was huge: more than 200,000 could lose their lives in the LSHTM calculation, and 250,000 according to Imperial.

A source close to the two teams said Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial, and Professor John Edmunds of LSHTM — who had both attended Sage meetings at the time — became increasingly concerned after the figures had been calculated. It seemed that all the scenarios the teams were asked to model were insufficiently draconian to avert a disaster. “We looked at the mitigation strategies one by one and in combination and we realised that they would still likely result in large numbers of deaths,” said Edmunds.

However, the source said the government did not even ask the teams to model whether a lockdown might be the solution and instead only commis-

60,000 people flocked to the opening of the four-day Cheltenham festival on Tuesday, March 10.

The festival had once been cancelled for foot and mouth, a livestock disease, but it was not going to stop for the coronavirus, especially with the prime minister sending out messages that Britain was open as usual. On the opening day, Ian Renton, the festival's director, wrote to concerned local councillors setting out the reasons for going ahead.

It said: "As with events from England v Wales attended by the prime minister at Twickenham on Saturday to 10 Premier League games around the country this weekend, the government guidance is for the business of the country to continue as usual while ensuring we adhere to and promote the latest public health advice."

Bottles of hand sanitiser were placed in the washrooms and around the racecourse for the crowds who mingled and pressed together in the enclosures drinking and eating. One of those people was Jules Anan, a 55-year-old freelance photographer, who worked on all four days taking photographs of celebrities, tycoons and royals who had joined the throng. Ten days later he found himself struggling for breath as he was rushed to Cheltenham General Hospital and placed on oxygen. "My lungs basically gave up," he said. "I knew I was in a bad way."

He cannot be certain about

how he became infected with the virus, which he eventually shook off, but he believes he may have become infected during the races. "There was a guy in the bed opposite me at the hospital who was at the races too and thinks he got it there."

Gloucestershire would later experience a surge in hospital death rates and the effects of the event may have spread across the country. Two racing enthusiasts who attended the festival died on the same day at the end of March.

They were Paul Townend, 61, a racehorse owner from Stratford-upon-Avon, who had his ventilator switched off in Warwick Hospital, and David Hodgkiss, a 71-year-old chief executive of a steelmaking firm and chairman of Lancashire cricket club, from Cumbria.

Townend's widow, Geraldine, blames her husband's death on the government's failure to bring in the lockdown earlier. "I don't know why we were so late," she said. "Other countries were in lockdown well before us. The writing was on the wall."

One of the last sporting fixtures played this year was on March 11, when 3,000 fans came from Spain to watch Liverpool play Atlético Madrid in the Champions League. According to the Imperial College and Oxford estimates, Spain had 640,000 infections at the time compared with 100,000 in Britain, although it was just a week ahead in terms of the spread of the virus such was its

unchecked growth across the UK during that period.

Edge Health, which analyses health data for the NHS, conducted modelling that estimated that the match and the Cheltenham festival were linked to 41 and 37 extra deaths respectively at nearby hospitals between 25 and 35 days later, compared with similar hospital trusts used as a control. And that was just the local hospitals.

THE HERD

Back in London on the day before the Cheltenham festival began, the chief scientist Vallance had been put forward to express the scientific view that mass gatherings were not a big problem. Vallance, who had left a £780,000-a-year job in the pharmaceutical industry a year before to take the job advising ministers, explained that gatherings "actually don't make much difference".

He said: "There's only a certain number of people you can infect. So, one person in a 70,000-seater stadium is not going to infect the stadium. They will infect potentially a few people they've got very close contact with. That's true in any setting: in the house, in a church, in a restaurant."

Sir David King, one of Vallance's predecessors and a critic of the administration, is scathing about the reasoning on mass gatherings. His son was at the Cheltenham festival and later suffered coronavirus symptoms, which took him three weeks to recover from.

King said: “If you’ve ever been to a race meeting or football match, you would normally meet your friends in a pub beforehand, then you often need to get a train — there are long queues and big crowds. Anyone who has attended any of these events knows you are in contact with a very large number of people.

“But worse than that, the people at these football matches and horse races come from all over the country and return to all over the country. It’s the ideal way to spread the virus. My only sensible interpretation is that is what you would advise if you were aiming for herd immunity.”

The news from the government was becoming increasingly gloomy that Monday, March 9. After chairing another Cobra meeting, Johnson had been forced to announce that efforts to contain the virus were unlikely to succeed on their own. He said measures would have to be introduced to delay the spread and he would follow the scientific advice and act when the time was judged to be right.

Whitty told journalists that the first of those measures — asking anyone with respiratory symptoms or a fever to self-isolate — would be the next step, but not for another 10 to 14 days. The delays and the tolerance of mass gatherings in a way fitted with the same policy. There was a view within the team advising the government that once contact tracing had failed to contain the out-

break then a burgeoning number of cases was inevitable — even desirable.

The plan — which the modellers had already estimated would cause more than 200,000 deaths — was to allow the virus to infect large parts of the population, while shielding the old and the vulnerable, and bringing in measures to slow down the rate of infection when it looked as if the numbers of cases might overwhelm the NHS.

The thinking behind this approach was that any attempt to shut down the virus completely would have repercussions later, with a likely second outbreak that might cause an even greater death toll in the autumn and winter, as insufficient numbers of people would have acquired immunity to the virus. This was the implicit herd immunity aspect of the policy that became so controversial when it became explicit as the second week of March wore on.

Vallance told the Monday press conference: “What you can’t do is suppress this thing

completely and what you shouldn’t do is suppress this thing completely because all that happens is that this thing pops up later in the year when the NHS is in a more vulnerable stage in the winter.”

A source who was advising Downing Street at the time said that herd immunity was central to the government’s plans in late February and early March. “There was always this message coming straight down of, ‘We’ve all got to get it,’” the source said. “And I remember having a conversation about how, ‘I don’t like this and this chicken-pox party thing.’ In February and March it was like, we’ve all got to get it at some point and that was just a sort of mantra.”

But patience was running out with the government’s delays and inaction. On Wednesday, March 11, Anthony Costello, professor of global health at University College London and a former World Health Organisation director, tweeted what many experts were thinking.

“We’re simply not doing enough now. We shd [sic] ban mass gatherings, close parliaments, alert all health workers about protective equipment and hygiene, close schools/colleges, promote home working wherever possible, and protect workers in the gig economy. Every day of delay will kill.”

On Thursday, March 12, there was a deepened gravity in the prime minister’s voice when, standing in front of two Union Jack flags, he told the nation: “This is the worst pub-



ANYONE WHO HAS BEEN TO A RACE MEETING KNOWS YOU WILL BE CLOSE TO A LOT OF PEOPLE

lic health crisis for a generation . . . I must level with you, level with the British public — more families, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.”

Only nine days earlier he had described the virus as a “moderate illness”. But by that Thursday the number of cases had jumped from 51 on March 3 to 596 and there had been 10 deaths. The contain strategy had not worked and contact tracing was abandoned — as the failure to increase testing capacity during previous weeks made it impossible.

By then it would have been futile anyway because the Imperial and Oxford back-modelling estimates predict by that day 130,000 people had caught the virus. This suggests that the contact testing programme had picked up only 0.5% of the infections when it was finally discarded.

The government had clearly misread the speed of the virus’s acceleration. So the first of the mitigation measures was finally brought in that day when people were told to self-isolate at home if they had symptoms. Just three days before, Whitty had said this measure would be introduced in 10 to 14 days.

Two other measures would also be brought in — the banning of mass gatherings and isolation of whole households if one person had symptoms — but again the government stressed these would be delayed to the “right time” in the future.

Vallance and Whitty explained the staged timing by saying people might tire of such social distancing if it was brought in too early and lasted a long time. “If people go too early they become very fatigued. This is going to be a long haul. It is very important we don’t start things in advance of need,” Whitty said.

The newspapers the next morning, Friday the 13th, were withering. “Johnson’s response has not been to lock down entire cities or even the whole country as China, South Korea and Italy have done. He has not ordered the closure of schools, as Ireland and Denmark did yesterday. Nor has he ordered the cancellation of large public events, as France and even Scotland has done,” complained The Times leader.

That morning Vallance went on Radio 4’s Today programme and dug an even deeper hole for colleagues by mentioning the phrase spin doctors did not want the public to hear. The government’s aim, he said, was to suppress the virus but not completely and “to build up some degree of herd immunity” while protecting the vulnerable. Later, on Sky News, he said that herd immunity would require 60% of the population to contract the virus.

That would be 40 million people — of whom 1% were likely to die, based on events in China and Italy. It was quite a gamble as it had not yet even been established whether people would develop long-run-

ning antibody resistance after contracting the virus.

THE SOLUTION

The days were ticking by quickly. Despite repeated assertions that the government was following scientific advice, there was increasing concern among its two university modelling teams that their warnings — that the death toll would still be horrendous even if the mitigation measures were introduced — were going unheeded.

They took matters into their own hands and, without being commissioned to do so, began crunching the numbers on a lockdown. The first results were contained in a LSHTM study — co-authored by John Edmunds and his colleague Nicholas Davies. This was communicated to the government’s advisory modelling committee on Wednesday, March 11, according to Davies. Modellers at Edinburgh University, led by Professor Mark Woolhouse, confirmed the findings.

The report advised that the death rate could be drastically cut with more severe measures to suppress the virus. It predicted that intermittent periods of intensive lockdown-type measures would prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed.

Ferguson and his team at Imperial drew similar conclusions that week in an equally devastating report. The early results of that work were discussed by Sage that week and provided to the government

that weekend. A draft was also sent to the White House as it predicted up to 1.2 million deaths in America under a mitigation strategy.

The team estimated that the number of UK deaths could be cut to about 30,000 with a series of lockdowns over a two-year period, whereas the government's preferred mitigation measures could allow hundreds of thousands of deaths. The two reports were the beginning of the end for the government's strategy.

WORLD CLOSSES DOWN

The world was closing down by Saturday, March 14. France said it was shutting non-essential public locations, Spain went into lockdown that evening, America had announced a ban on flights from the UK and the Italians were holding impromptu concerts from balconies. They had been confined to their homes since Tuesday.

In the UK many people had given up waiting for the government to take action and were taking matters into their own hands. Firms were encouraging employees to work from home, and suddenly that Saturday's sporting fixture list was looking threadbare as the leagues cancelled games of their own volition despite the huge losses in revenues.

The government's strategy was in shreds: ripped apart by its own modelling scientists and looking creepily Darwinian after the unfortunate introduction of the words "herd im-

munity". More than 200 scientists and academics signed a letter condemning the delay policy and saying thousands of lives could be saved by introducing stricter social distancing measures immediately.

These were the problems confronting Johnson when he summoned a meeting of his inner team at 9.15am that Saturday. By then it is understood his most influential adviser Cummings had gone through a "Domscone conversion" to being a strong advocate of the kind of strategy that would lead to lockdown.

A source who attended Cobra meetings at the time said: "The libertarian in Boris didn't want lockdown." However, Johnson is said to have been won over at the meeting because of the seriousness of the threat, and a decision was made in principle to lock down Britain. He told those around him "we need to be taking all measures necessary".

But the key issues of how and when to introduce a lockdown would not be resolved for another nine days. A senior Tory source said Johnson "bottled" lockdown during the following week because of concerns about the economy.

The failure to seize the initiative and go into lockdown at that point was a decision that cost many lives. After deliberating over the weekend, the government waited until the evening of Monday March 16 to introduce a package of advisory measures. People were told to work from home if pos-

sible, avoid pubs and restaurants and self-isolate at home if someone in their household was ill.

Even scientists on the government's own advisory committees were alarmed by the delays in introducing more stringent measures. Professor Peter Openshaw, a member of the government's Nervtag (new and emerging respiratory virus threats advisory group) committee, said: "Many of us on the scientific advisory committees were quite keen that action should be taken a couple of weeks before action actually was taken.

"I think that critical period of delay made the big difference to the peak numbers, both of hospitalisations and of deaths. I think everyone would accept now in retrospect that if we'd gone for lockdown a couple of weeks earlier that would have greatly reduced the numbers of hospitalisations and deaths."

Every day was vital: the UK already had an estimated 320,000 infections on March 16, according to the Imperial and Oxford back-dated modelling, and it would double again almost every three days despite the advisory measures which were introduced.

FINAL DAYS TO LOCKDOWN

The final week before lockdown was played out in slow motion. There had been a fundamental pivot in government policy towards more draconian actions but the prime minister is said to have still been un-

comfortable with the idea of a full legally enforced shutdown which many of his advisers now saw as an unfortunate necessity.

It was to be a week of more delays and more drip-feed measures. The big announcement on Wednesday was that schools would be closed indefinitely but that would not take effect until Friday afternoon.

The measures to close cafés, pubs, bars, clubs, restaurants, gyms, leisure centres, night-clubs, theatres and cinemas would not take effect until midnight that evening. Isolation to protect the 1.5 million people identified as extremely vulnerable as a result of existing conditions would not be announced until Sunday, March 22.

While many people were already working from home and starting to stand their distance from others in social situations, there were reports that many commuter buses and trains were still packed in central London, which had more than a third of known cases. Google data tracking people's movements suggests the use of public transport was down by only a third across the UK by Wednesday, March 18. It was clear not everyone was following the government's advice.

Having backed the government's earlier strategy, Cummings was said to now be convinced it would not work and was advocating a lockdown, starting with restricting traffic in and out of London. Military chiefs are said to have been

put on notice that their troops might be needed to enforce a lockdown in the capital starting at midnight on Saturday.

A government insider said the prime minister looked "haunted" as he wrestled with the big decision of what to do next. His attempts at jollity had backfired at the beginning of the week when he described the effort to equip the NHS with more ventilators to meet the coming blizzard of respiratory illnesses as "operation last gasp".

The gearing up of the NHS had one particularly ill-thought-out and reckless consequence. On Thursday, March 19, the health department announced 15,000 people should be discharged from hospitals into the community and care homes to free beds for coronavirus patients. This was without a mandatory requirement that they be tested for the virus.

On Friday, March 20, Dr Jenny Harries, deputy chief medical officer for England, reassured the country that there was a "perfectly adequate supply of PPE [personal protective equipment] for care workers and any supply pressures have been "completely resolved". The lack of PPE and the failure to protect the elderly in care homes would shortly become the next national scandal to haunt the government and expose its lack of planning since January.

At the Downing Street press conference, Harries advised people to stay two metres

apart during walks while standing at a lectern less than a metre from the prime minister.

By that day, the number of infections had doubled during the midweek to an estimated 790,000, according to the Imperial and Oxford data. Despite the growing dangers, many people popped out for a last drink before the pubs shut overnight. The clement spring weather that weekend brought thousands of people out into open spaces in the new world where they could no longer congregate in sports clubs, pubs or restaurants.

Johnson skipped the daily press briefing on Saturday, March 21 and took a break with his fiancée Carrie Symonds in the prime minister's home at Chequers. He returned the next day to host a press conference, where he made the same mistake as Harries, standing a metre away from colleagues while imploring the nation to stay two metres apart.

In Downing Street there was a growing realisation Britain was on a trajectory to be "Italy, at least" in terms of cases and fatalities, according to a source advising the top team. The final straws were the crowds out in the fresh air on Mothering Sunday and the still considerable commuter traffic on Monday, with half of workers still travelling to their offices. Johnson was forced to announce the lockdown that evening.

When the new measures

came in on the evening of Monday, March 23, the infections had almost doubled again since the previous Friday and there were an estimated 1.5 million across the UK, according to Imperial and Oxford's new data. Close to 1.2 million of those infections had happened since Johnson resisted calls to lock down on March 16.

An analysis of the data shows the lockdown swiftly reduced the spread of the virus but was introduced so late that Britain had a higher number of infections than every other main European country at the time they took the same emergency measures. For example, Italy had an estimated 1.2 million at its lockdown on March 10, and Germany, which

locked down a day earlier than the UK on March 22, is estimated to have had just 270,000 infections.

There had been too much delay. The sheer number of people who had been allowed to become infected meant the country was riddled with the virus and the only defence was the workers of the NHS who had been left critically short of testing and protective equipment.

To date, 36,675 people in Britain have been confirmed as having died from the virus, including more than 300 NHS staff and care workers. Within four days of lockdown the infection had found its way to the top of government when the prime minister himself tested positive.

Last night a government spokesman said: "Our strategy has been designed at all times to protect our NHS and save lives. Our response has ensured that the NHS can provide the best care possible for people who become ill, enabled hospitals to maintain essential services and ensured continuing support for people ill in the community.

"It has been vital through this global pandemic to make interventions which the public can feasibly adopt in sufficient numbers over long periods. The government has been very clear that herd immunity has never been our policy or goal."

Opening image: Peter Macdiarmid/LNP ■

Coronavirus timeline: how the virus spread in the UK

The Sunday Times

March 2

Boris Johnson says the UK is “very, very well prepared” after chairing his first Cobra meeting on the coronavirus

March 3

Top scientific modellers warn the government that up to 250,000 people may die without drastic action to stop the virus spreading

March 4

Officials announce the biggest one-day leap in confirmed Covid-19 cases to 87

March 5

Johnson appears on ITV’s *This Morning*, ignoring scientific advice by shaking hands with Phillip Schofield. First UK death announced

March 6

Nadine Dorries, the health minister, goes into self-isolation after being struck with Covid-19 symptoms

March 7

Ireland cancels its Six Nations rugby match with Italy in Dublin, but Johnson attends the England v Wales match at Twickenham

March 8

France bans gatherings of



Boris Johnson and fiancée Carrie Symonds at the England v Wales match at Twickenham on March 7
FACUNDO ARRIZABALAGA

more than 1,000 people. However, French rugby fans travel to Edinburgh to watch their team play Scotland

March 9

Ireland bans St Patrick’s Day parades. Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK’s chief scientific adviser, claims mass gatherings “actually don’t make much difference” to the spread of the disease

March 10

60,000 punters attend the opening day of the four-day Cheltenham horse-racing festival. Italy, meanwhile, goes into lockdown

March 11

3,000 football fans from Spain — where matches are being played behind closed doors — travel to Anfield to watch Liverpool v Atlético Madrid in the Champions League

March 12

With 10 UK deaths so far, Johnson admits this is “the worst public health crisis for a generation . . . many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time”

March 13

Vallance tells broadcasters that the government’s strategy had in part been to “build up some degree of herd immunity”

March 14

France and Spain announce draconian restrictions on public movements. Johnson's team also begins to consider tougher measures

March 15

Ireland orders all pubs, bars and hotels to close. In Cardiff, the Stereophonics play to a packed arena for the second night in a row

March 16

The prime minister advises Britons to work from home if possible, avoid restaurants and bars, and to self-isolate if someone in their home is ill

March 17

Vallance tells MPs that if deaths can be limited to

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20,000 or under it would be "a good outcome"

March 18

The government announces the indefinite closure of all schools in two days' time

March 19

Hospitals are told to discharge patients to care homes and into the community to free up NHS beds. No mandatory virus testing is required

March 20

All pubs, restaurants, cinemas and gyms are ordered to shut by midnight

March 21

Johnson visits his Chequers retreat with partner Carrie Symonds as the estimated number of infections edges to one million

March 22

1.5 million of the country's most vulnerable people are told to self-isolate for at least three months to protect themselves

March 23

Johnson finally goes on air to announce a full UK lockdown ■