



Covid-19: WHO declares pandemic because of “alarming levels” of spread, severity, and inaction

Elisabeth Mahase

The BMJ

Covid-19 has officially been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, as its director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warned that he was “deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction.”

The virus began spreading in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019 and has spread to over 100 countries, with more than 120 000 cases and over 4000 deaths reported as of 11 March.

“‘Pandemic’ is not a word to use lightly or carelessly,” said Ghebreyesus, speaking at the daily press briefing. “It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.”

He said that that countries could still do much more to “change the course of this pandemic.”

“This is not just a public health crisis; it is a crisis that will touch every sector—so every sector and every individual must be involved in the fight,” he warned. “I have said from the beginning that countries must take a ‘whole of government,’ ‘whole of society’ approach, built around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives, and minimise impact.”

Larger interventions

Michael Head, senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, UK, said, “The WHO stated that some countries are struggling with a lack of resources, but also

‘a lack of resolve.’ This is clearly a direct indication that they consider many countries have been slow to scale up their responses.

“The characterisation of the situation as a pandemic may mean that we see countries feel incentivised to implement further larger interventions, such as banning of public gatherings, sooner than they were otherwise planning to.”

Different countries have reacted to covid-19 in various ways. In Italy the government has placed the entire country on shutdown, while in Portugal all medical schools have been closed.¹

In the UK the government has focused on ramping up its testing capacity, as well as introducing a community service to manage patients at home if they do not need immediate hospital admission.²

In the US, President Trump has claimed that public health warnings on covid-19 are a conspiracy against him.³

1 Mahase E. Covid-19: Portugal closes all medical schools after 31 cases confirmed in the country. *BMJ* 2020;368:m986. 10.1136/bmj.m986 32156675

2 Mahase E. Covid-19: out-of-hours providers are drafted in to manage non-urgent patients in community. *BMJ* 2020;368:m959. 10.1136/bmj.m959 32152010

3 Dyer O. Trump claims public health warnings on covid-19 are a conspiracy against him. *BMJ* 2020;368:m941. 10.1136/bmj.m941 32144176

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>