



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;373:n1504
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1504>
 Published: 11 June 2021

COMMENT

Covid-19: Science the fall guy as Hancock seeks to shift blame

Gareth Iacobucci

England's health and social care secretary, Matt Hancock, blamed "scientific consensus" for key government failings during the covid-19 pandemic, as he came out fighting against his critics this week.

Giving evidence to MPs on 10 June at the health and science select committees' joint inquiry into lessons learnt from the covid-19 pandemic,¹ Hancock defended both his and the government's record and rebutted the claims that the prime minister's former chief aide, Dominic Cummings, made in front of the same committee two weeks before.²⁻⁴

The health secretary seemed emboldened on learning that Cummings had failed to supply the committee with documentary evidence for the numerous allegations of incompetence and misconduct he had levelled at the government and, most pointedly, at Hancock himself.

Hancock started confidently and was as enthusiastic as ever, responding to a list of Cummings's key allegations with the air of a man who had turned up well prepared for an exam.

"I take, took, and have taken full responsibility for all of the areas that I'm responsible for," he said, sounding more like a contestant from *The Apprentice* rather than the secretary of state for health.

"I can be quite forceful when I'm trying to get something through that needs to happen," he added, sounding increasingly like one of Alan Sugar's hopefuls in the TV boardroom. "You can't respond to a pandemic just by pointing figures," Hancock pointed out, before, in true *Apprentice* contestant style, pointing fingers.

Mistakes were largely brushed off or put down to his naively following the advice of others. In a sadly predictable development a wriggling Hancock blamed "clinical advice" for several major government failings.

He said he "bitterly" regretted accepting what he described as early scientific consensus that asymptomatic transmission of covid-19 was unlikely—before health committee chair Jeremy Hunt gently pointed out to him that there was no consensus on this and that the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies had said in January 2020 that asymptomatic transmission could occur.

Hancock also insisted that backing a lockdown earlier last spring would have meant "over-ruling scientific consensus," a claim that Stephen Reicher, a member of the government's Independent Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B), dismissed in a subsequent statement as "quite simply untrue."

There were several important things that the health secretary couldn't recollect, most notably whether or not his department had leaned on Public Health England to soften discharge testing advice, because of a lack of testing capacity,⁵ and whether the cabinet secretary had investigated the veracity of Hancock's claims about NHS staff access to personal protective equipment.

But one thing he could recall was his delight at hitting his target to reach 100 000 covid-19 tests a day last year, a target that was savaged by Cummings during his recent testimony.

"Sometimes you have to put yourself in jeopardy, put yourself on the line," Hancock said, switching from Apprentice Matt to Action Hero Matt in the blink of an eye.

Hancock became more defensive as the session progressed, showing flashes of irritation as some MPs turned up the heat and pressed him for detail on some of his answers. But by closely aligning himself with the prime minister—who he said had given him "wholesale support"—and casting Cummings as an untrustworthy outsider that the government was better off without, Hancock may well have done enough to avoid hearing the dreaded words "you're fired," despite his unconvincing performance.

Correction: On 15 June 2021 we corrected a quotation. Matt Hancock said, "You can't respond to a pandemic just by pointing fingers" (not "figures").

- 1 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: How did the health secretary respond to Dominic Cummings's allegations? *BMJ* 2021;373:n1505.
- 2 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: PM's former chief aide accuses health secretary of lying over PPE and access to treatment. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1369. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1369 pmid: 34039614
- 3 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: "Complete nonsense" to say government shielded care homes, says PM's former aide. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1386. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1386 pmid: 34049851
- 4 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: Thousands died needlessly from UK pandemic response, says PM's former aide. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1374. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1374 pmid: 34045182
- 5 Ahmed N. Health department whistleblower: political pressure "watered down" Public Health England care home guidance over covid testing. 9 Jun 2021. <https://bylinetimes.com/2021/06/09/health-department-whistleblower-political-pressure-watered-down-public-health-england-care-home-guidance-over-covid-testing>.