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Covid-19

Rapid testing rolled out to everyone in England

Everyone in England is now able to order free lateral flow tests online to use at home, access them through their workplace, or get them from their local authority or pharmacies, said the government, “to help prevent outbreaks and reclaim a more normal way of life.” Ministers said that more than 120 000 positive cases of covid-19 that would not have been found otherwise had been identified since the rollout. But critics described the approach as costly and unevaluated, warning that it may provide false reassurance. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n902)

Incidence in England fell by 60% in two months

The rate of new SARS-CoV-2 infections in England fell by about 60% from February to March but has now levelled off, shows the 10th round of the React 1 study. The estimated R number is now 1, and infections are resulting in fewer admissions and death. Primary school children had the highest rate of infections at 0.41%, while over 65s had the lowest at 0.09%. Paul Elliott, director of React 1, said, “We need to continue to approach the situation with caution and keep sticking to the rules.” (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n929)

Neurological or psychiatric diagnoses are common

A third of people who have had covid-19 then have a neurological or psychiatric condition diagnosed within six months of infection—the first such diagnosis in 13% of patients—a study of 236 379 US patient records has found. Prevalence increased with severity of covid-19, with nearly half (46%) of people admitted to intensive care having a neurological or psychiatric condition diagnosed within six months (a first diagnosis for 26%), rising to 62% in patients who had had delirium (encephalopathy) during their covid-19 illness, the team reported in *Lancet Psychiatry*. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n908)

Italy's healthcare workers must have vaccine

Italy became Europe's first country to make vaccination against covid-19 mandatory for healthcare workers, as its government approved an emergency decree on 1 April to contain a third wave of the disease. Health professionals who refuse to have the vaccine will have the option to be transferred to duties that do not risk spreading the virus or to be suspended without pay for as much as a year. Italy has had over 3.5 million cases of covid-19 and 108 839 deaths (3%). (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n905)

Bringing ethical thinking to pandemic policy making

The UK Pandemic Ethics Accelerator (ukpandemicethics.org), a collaboration between four universities and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, was launched to bring ethical thinking to

pandemic policy making. Principal investigator Ilina Singh, from Oxford University, said, “The pandemic has raised enormous challenges that require both world-leading science and world-leading ethics to address, to ensure public trust and accountability.” The accelerator has engaged with the Cabinet Office's consultation on vaccine certification and will publish regular rapid reviews and other outputs.

Tracing is enhanced in south London

NHS Test and Trace is providing extra testing and genomic sequencing in parts of south London, predominantly the boroughs of Wandsworth and Lambeth, where 44 confirmed and 30 probable cases of the variant first identified in South Africa have been found. All people with identified cases are isolating or have completed their isolation, and their contacts have been traced and asked to isolate. Everybody aged 11 years or over who lives or works in or travels through these boroughs is being advised to have a PCR test, whether or not they show symptoms.

Foreign health workers

Visas for eligible staff to be extended for another year

A further 14 000 healthcare workers and their dependents whose visas were due to expire before 1 October 2021 are to have them extended for free for one year, the Home Office has said. The extension will include the Immigration Health Surcharge. NHS and private healthcare staff who need to renew their visas have to complete a simple online form to verify their identity, and their employers will be asked to confirm their eligibility.

Body image

Stop using BMI as measure of health, say MPs

MPs on the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee have called on the government to order a review of its obesity strategy after criticising its approach to eating disorders and poor body image as “potentially harmful” and “triggering” for the people it is meant to help. They also said that BMI, originally introduced to measure whole populations, should no longer be used to determine whether someone's weight is healthy. Calorie content on menus should also be scrapped, they said, and the use of altered images in advertising should be more strictly controlled. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n941)

Regulation

Trust faces criminal charges over sepsis deaths

The Care Quality Commission is bringing a criminal prosecution against Dudley Group NHS Foundation Trust, two of whose patients died after alleged exposure to “significant risk of avoidable harm.” The charges relate to care given before the deaths of a mother of six, Natalie Billingham, 33, and 14 year old

Kaysie-Jane Robinson, who both died of sepsis. Lawyers for the trust appeared before Dudley magistrates on 7 April for a brief initial hearing. The trust would have to enter pleas to the charges at a hearing on 2 July. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n932)

Call for end to GMC's power to appeal tribunal

Thirteen healthcare organisations are calling on the UK government to act to remove the General Medical Council's power to appeal against decisions by medical practitioner tribunals. The government agreed in 2018 that the power, which duplicates similar powers held by the Professional Standards Authority, should be scrapped, and the government is consulting on legislation to abolish it. But healthcare bodies have told Matt Hancock, health and social care secretary for England, that the move is urgent and should be made now, by including it in the forthcoming health and social care bill. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n903)

Maternity services

Mental health hubs to open by April 2022

Around 6000 women in England each year will gain access to 26 new hubs that will provide care and treatment for a range of mental health problems related to pregnancy and birth, such as post-traumatic stress disorder after giving birth, severe fear of giving birth, and bereavement after the death of a baby. The clinics, which were promised as part of the NHS long term plan, will also provide training to maternity services staff. Ten hubs will open within months, with all 26 operating by April 2022.

University of Liverpool

Staff vote for strike action over job cuts

The University and College Union said that 84% of its members from the University of Liverpool who voted in a ballot over job cuts supported strike action and 90% backed action short of a strike, which could involve a marking and assessment boycott. The university's restructuring plans could see 47 jobs lost in its Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. The union is in dispute with the university over "flawed" data on research and grant income to assess performance and claims these metrics are being used to select for redundancy. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.n825)