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Sixty seconds on . . . a covid-19 inquiry

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Surely it's not the right time?

That's what Prime Minister Boris Johnson said when he committed last July to an independent inquiry.¹ Such a thing would be "an irresponsible diversion" while the pandemic continues, he recently reiterated.²

But the public want answers

So polling suggests,³ but formal inquiries take years. Calls for a quick review, from medical journals,⁴ the BMA and royal colleges,⁵ and bereaved families, have gone unheeded, however.

So why are we waiting?

I don't know. Norway and Sweden have started inquiries.⁶ Scotland may begin one by the end of the year.⁷

What about learning lessons to save lives now?

Quite. The informal People's Covid Inquiry (www.peoplescovidinquiry.com), convened by the Keep Our NHS Public campaign, is filling the gap, receiving testimony from experts, key workers, and the public at fortnightly hearings.⁸ The inquiry's panellist Neena Modi, professor of neonatal medicine, told *The BMJ*, "If ever there was a time to ask questions, it has got to be now."

I hope this is about more than blame

The inquiry's chair, the human rights barrister Michael Mansfield QC, told *The BMJ* that the "focus is the present predicament" and "the rebuild of public health." The inquiry aims to publish recommendations, establish accountability, and bring justice. "We endeavour to ask the questions everyone wants answers to," he said.

About the availability of personal protective equipment, for instance?

"A complete dereliction of duty," is how the palliative care consultant Rachel Clarke described failures in supply to hospices, at the latest hearing. "We kept calling the allegedly 24 hour hotline and there was no response."

Damning stuff

That's not the half of it. The former government chief science adviser David King told the inquiry that the government was ill prepared despite having detailed predictions of an imminent global pandemic. Anthony Costello, a former director at the World Health Organization, said that early in the pandemic "policy was being led by people with no public health experience." Inquiry panellist and consultant radiologist Jacky Davis told *The BMJ*, "It is shocking: tens of thousands of people have died unnecessarily because of government mistakes."

I hope the government will be called for cross examination?

Alas, it hasn't replied to the inquiry's invitation. Unlike Oxford GP and *BMJ* columnist Helen Salisbury, health inequalities authority Michael Marmot, and former children's laureate Michael Rosen, to name just a few.

Can I watch, and contribute?

Hearings will consider NHS preparedness, public health strategy, and the impact on healthcare staff, social care, inequalities, mental health, and children. Submit questions and testimony at www.peoplescovidinquiry.com.

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