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The UK government's covid complacency shows lessons haven't been learned

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This week, England's health secretary, Sajid Javid told a Downing Street covid briefing that the government would not "at this point" be implementing its so-called "Plan B" measures to prevent the NHS being overwhelmed—including mandatory face coverings indoors and advising people to work from home.

To repurpose a phrase that Javid himself used in July when justifying his decision to remove almost all covid restrictions in England—"If not now, then when?"¹

On 20 October 2021—the day of the briefing—the UK recorded 49 139 new cases of covid-19, 179 deaths, and 869 hospital admissions. Javid warned that rising daily infection rates "could yet go as high as 100,000 a day." The NHS and the BMA say ministers must implement Plan B now, amid warnings of a torrid winter ahead for the health service.²

Javid said the government was "looking closely at the data," and "staying vigilant preparing for all eventualities." But by failing to act now, this amounts to little more than burying its head in the sand.

In one particularly jarring moment, the health secretary said that deaths from covid remain "mercifully low." That won't provide any consolation to the relatives and friends of the 954 people who have died in the past seven days. The complacency, and the sense that over 100 people dying each day from covid is acceptable, is maddening.

Javid adopted a sombre tone in his address, stressing that the "pandemic is not over." He made reference to the "Blitz spirit," warning the public that unless they "do their bit" by getting vaccinated, they could lose freedoms that returned when restrictions were removed in July.

It feels as if the ground is being prepared to blame the public if the situation worsens further, but the government cannot shirk responsibility for the current situation. By recklessly abandoning all precautionary measures against covid in England when cases were still high, it let the genie out of the bottle, sending a message to the public that the pandemic was all but over.

The contrast between England with other western European nations—which retained some protective measures while opening up gradually and currently have a fraction of the cases, fewer hospital admissions, and fewer deaths—is stark.

While Scotland and Wales have taken different approaches—retaining some measures such as face coverings in indoor spaces—England has pinned everything on vaccination, a wholly inadequate public health strategy. It has advised people that it

might be a good idea to wear face coverings, yet at the same time, pictures circulate in the press of maskless ministers huddled around a crowded cabinet table. The approach now, whatever ministers say, seems to amount to a mixture of vaccinations, herd immunity, and crossing our fingers.

As Matt Morgan, consultant in intensive care medicine and a columnist in *The BMJ*, sagely pointed out, "The time to do something in a pandemic is generally before it seems the right time to do something."³

Yet time and again since March 2020, the government has dithered and delayed for too long, waiting until things get to a critical point before acting. There is an inescapable sense that history is repeating itself.

"We are rapidly approaching a position where, yet again, the government is delaying for too long, and equivocating over taking action," said chair of BMA council, Chaand Nagpaul.

"This is the time to learn the lessons of the past and act fast, or else we will face far more extreme measures later."

The BMA has accused the UK government of being "wilfully negligent" by not implementing Plan B now, and it is hard to view the current inaction in any other way.

In truth, Plan B should have been Plan A.

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- 1 Covid-19 Update in the House of Commons <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2021-07-12c.21.0&s=if+not++now%2C+when%3F+sajid+javid#g21.1>
- 2 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: Government must reintroduce precautionary measures now, say health leaders *BMJ* 2021; 375:n2566
- 3 Twitter: Matt Morgan https://twitter.com/dr_mattmorgan/status/1450773756146823171?s=20