The UK’s public health response to covid-19
Too little, too late, too flawed

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The UK government and its advisers were confident that they were “well prepared” when covid-19 swept East Asia. The four-pronged plan of 3 March to contain, delay, research, and mitigate was supported by all UK countries and backed, they claimed, by science. With over 30,000 hospital and community deaths by 12 May, where did the plan go wrong? What was the role of public health in the biggest public health crisis since the Spanish flu of 1918? And what now needs to be done?

What is clear is that the UK’s response so far has neither been well prepared nor remotely adequate (see infographic). The weakness of the preparations was exposed in 2016 by Exercise Cygnus, a pandemic simulation, and the necessary remedial steps were not taken.3 On 30 January, the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern and governments were urged to prepare for global spread of covid-19 from East Asia.4 Detailed case studies followed showing the need for high levels of mechanical ventilation and high death rates.5 6 But the UK ignored these warnings.

Delay and dilution

By 11 March, Italy had taken firm public health action and was in full lockdown, followed closely by Spain and France. The UK’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) rejected lockdown, believing that the population would not accept it. SAGE, chaired by Patrick Vallance, the government’s
The government inexplicably announced a move from the containment phase in its strategy to the delay phase.1 One day later, the government announced a lockdown.
commitment to international cooperation. Sharing the science and the uncertainties that inform political decisions will help rebuild lost public trust. Politicians and their advisers cannot hide behind science to avoid responsibility for making difficult decisions in a global crisis or merely repeat that they are following the science.

Above all, the response to covid-19 is not about flattening epidemic curves, modelling, or epidemiology. It is about protecting lives and communities most obviously at risk in our unequal society. The most serious public health crisis of our times requires a strong and credible public health community at the heart of its response. A UK government that prioritises the health and wellbeing of the public will see the picture of rebuilding the disempowered and fragmented infrastructures of its public health system. Anything less is an insult to the tens of thousands of people who have lost their lives in a pandemic for which the UK was forewarned but not forearmed.

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