Seven days in medicine: 13-19 May 2020

Symptom update
Anosmia is added to symptoms for self-isolating
The UK’s four chief medical officers advised adding anosmia to continuous cough and fever as a symptom for which people should self-isolate because of probable covid-19 infection. In a statement issued on 18 May they said, “We have been closely monitoring the emerging data and evidence on covid-19 and after thorough consideration, we are now confident enough to recommend this new measure. The individual’s household should also self-isolate for 14 days as per the current guidelines and the individual should stay at home for seven days, or longer if they still have symptoms other than cough or loss of sense of smell or taste.”

Medical profession
Doctors’ concerns about personal health rise
Almost half (48%) of doctors working during the covid-19 pandemic reported feeling concerned or very concerned for their health, in a survey of members of the Royal College of Physicians with 1582 respondents. Among members from ethnic minorities this figure rose to 76%. The respondents’ concern reflects the ongoing lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE) or testing for covid-19 and the fact that so many staff are taking time off with suspected or confirmed covid-19. Some 16.5% of respondents said that they had been unable to access the PPE recommended by Public Health England in the past two weeks.

Doctors lack confidence in providing safe care
Of more than 10 000 doctors who responded to a BMA survey over two thirds said that they had little or no confidence that the expected increase in demand on the NHS from patients without covid-19 would be properly managed. Chaand Nagpaul, BMA chair of council, questioned what evidence the government was using if it believed that normal NHS services could resume. He said that NHS England’s “road map” gave no detail about how all patients would be cared for in an environment free of infection or how there would be enough PPE for staff and patients in covid and non-covid areas.

Testing
RCGP calls for joined-up testing strategy
Martin Marshall, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, wrote to England’s secretary of state for health and social care, Matt Hancock, to demand a joined-up strategy throughout the NHS and social care to ensure that “the right people are tested at the right time.” He called for pathology labs to update GP records with test results to help trace positive covid-19 cases, for testing kits to be readily available for patients with symptoms, and for clear guidance on how GPs can help patients access tests. He warned that clarity on testing strategy had not been sufficient to prevent a second wave of infections or secure the overall health of the population.

Schools
BMA: keep schools closed to avoid second spike
The BMA warned that the number of coronavirus infections remained too high to allow children back to school safely and backed teaching unions in urging caution and prioritising testing before reopening schools on 1 June. In a letter to Kevin Courtney, chair of the National Education Union, Chaand Nagpaul, BMA chair of council, highlighted the “relatively small amount of research available” on “the uncharted territory we find ourselves in.” Nagpaul concluded, “Until we have got case numbers much lower, we should not consider reopening schools.”

Emergency departments
Drop in numbers is “ticking time bomb”
Attendances at emergency departments in England totalled 917 000 in April 2020, down 56.6% on the same month last year and the lowest since data collection began in 2010, NHS figures showed.1 Nick Scriven, immediate past president of the Society for Acute Medicine, described the drop in attendances as a “ticking time bomb” that would be exacerbated by other pressures as hospitals tried to resume normal services. Keeping people with covid-19 separate from other patients would be a challenge, he said, as would the resilience of staff who had been “working flat out with little time for recovery.”

Research
Human genome study aims to understand disease
A study of the genetic basis for the varied outcomes to covid-19 infection was launched, aiming to recruit and sequence the entire genomes of 20 000 people who have been in intensive care, as well as control participants who have experienced milder disease. Understanding the increased burden of covid-19 disease in ethnic minority populations is one of its key aims. A new covid-19 genomics UK consortium (www.cogconsortium.uk/) will build on the existing Edinburgh based GenOMICC study of critical illness (https://genomicc.org) and the UK’s genomics...
infrastructure. Interest can be registered at www.genomicsengland.co.uk/covid-19/.

**Antibody testing will help to reveal immunity**
A study of as many as 20,000 people by UK Biobank and developed with the Wellcome Trust aims to track covid-19’s spread throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. Over six months it will ask UK Biobank volunteers, and their adult children and grandchildren, to provide a blood sample using a finger pricking device every month and answer questions about any relevant symptoms. The de-identified samples will be sent for validated antibody testing at the University of Oxford, and the first results are expected in early June.

**Convalescent plasma**
**No evidence that treatment is safe or effective**
A Cochrane review found much uncertainty as to whether convalescent plasma was effective in people admitted to hospital with covid-19, because all eight studies, with a total of 32 patients, had a high risk of bias and the reporting quality was low. Lise Estcourt, head of NHS Blood and Transplant’s clinical trials unit, said that a trial of convalescent plasma for adults admitted to intensive care in England (REMAP-CAP) was ongoing and that researchers hoped to open a trial in all inpatients, in collaboration with the RECOVERY trial, for people of all ages.

**Digital NHS**
**Plan “will fall short” without extra investment**
Ambitious plans to transform digital services in the NHS in England over the next decade are unlikely to be achieved without substantial extra funding, the National Audit Office (NAO) said. It found that progress towards the government’s 2014 digital strategy for the NHS had been slower than expected. The NAO said that NHS England and NHS Improvement had acknowledged that the £4.7bn (£5.25bn; $5.76bn) committed by the government to deliver its plan from 2016 to 2021 was “not enough to deliver the ambition” but could be used “to make a significant start and demonstrate the value of more funding in future.” (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.m1972)

**Global health**
**Covid-19 pandemic derails SDG progress**
Progress towards the United Nations’ sustainable development goals is too slow and is being further “thrown off track” by the covid-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization warned. Its World Health Statistics report showed that life expectancy in low income countries had risen by 21% (11 years) in 2000-16, but immunisation coverage has barely increased in recent years, and malaria gains may be reversed. In 2017 only a third to a half of the world’s population had access to essential health services. Over half (55%) lacked access to safely managed sanitation services, and over a quarter (29%) lacked safely managed drinking water. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.m1969)

**Overseas news**
**Trump fumes at adviser over lockdowns**
Tension between the Trump administration and US public health officials escalated this week after President Donald Trump openly criticised his top infectious disease specialist, Anthony Fauci, for testifying in Congress against the reopening of states that had not met the administration’s criteria for ending their lockdowns. Dozens of mostly Republican controlled states are lifting restrictions despite failing grades on metrics such as new daily infections and the percentage of positive test results. As the US passes 85,000 reported deaths, Fauci warned that “needless suffering and death” would ensue if lockdowns were lifted prematurely. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.m1993)