



LETTERS

FACE MASKS FOR THE PUBLIC DURING COVID-19

Laying straw men to rest: author's reply to "Urgency and uncertainty: covid-19, face masks, and evidence informed policy"

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In the eight weeks since it was published, our article in *The BMJ* on the public wearing face masks during the covid-19 pandemic has been cited 60 times and has an Altmetric score of over 3000.¹ Our basic argument for applying the precautionary principle seems to have drawn much sympathy from scientists and clinicians.

In those eight weeks many additional empirical studies have been published that support the efficacy or confirm the lack of serious harms associated with the lay public wearing face masks. To my knowledge, no robust study has been published that bears out the claim that the harms of wearing face masks in this pandemic outweigh the benefits.

In sum, I think that the arguments put forward in Martin and colleagues' letter are essentially straw men propped up by selective citation.² I have addressed them in detail in an open access, peer reviewed paper, with 89 references, recently published in the *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*.³

Martin and colleagues were well aware of that article—a preprint was published some weeks ago, and they corresponded with me about it on social media.

Competing interests: I am the author of the article being criticised. I have no personal interest in the use of face masks or coverings, though I do have a scientific one.

- 1 Greenhalgh T, Schmid MB, Czypionka T, Bassler D, Gruer L. Face masks for the public during the covid-19 crisis. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1435. 10.1136/bmj.m1435 32273267
- 2 Martin GP, Hanna E, Dingwall R. Urgency and uncertainty: covid-19, face masks, and evidence informed policy. *BMJ* 2020;369:m2017. 10.1136/bmj.m2017 32457043
- 3 Greenhalgh T. Face coverings for the public: Laying straw men to rest. *J Eval Clin Pract* 2020;e13415:e13415. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jep.13415.32455503>

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<https://bmj.com/coronavirus/usage>