London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m2937<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2937>

Published: 22 July 2020

Covid-19: Government failed to protect staff during height of pandemic, experts tell MPs

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Healthcare staff working at the height of the covid-19 pandemic in England were not properly protected and were forced to work in an unsafe environment, MPs have been told.

Appealing before the health and social care committee on 21 July, experts criticised the government and NHS management for their failure to provide staff with sufficient testing and personal protective equipment (PPE). The committee was gathering evidence for its inquiry into the management of the covid-19 outbreak.

Paul Nurse, director of the Francis Crick Institute, said he believed that the failure to implement better testing systems in the early days of the pandemic had contributed significantly to the problems.

He said, "At the height of the pandemic, our own research—which backs up what's been done elsewhere—found that up to 45% of healthcare workers were infected and they were infecting their colleagues and infecting patients, yet they weren't being tested systematically.

"In the healthcare environment we weren't providing proper protection, and it's important because it protects the most vulnerable in our society and it protects our healthcare workers. They deserve to work in a safe environment, and some of them are dying because of what they do. They deserve better."

John Bell, a fellow witness and regius professor of medicine at Oxford University, agreed, saying, "The failure to aggressively approach healthcare testing with PCR [polymerase chain reaction] was a major oversight. There was a suspicion, which I think is probably correct, that NHS institutions and the NHS were avoiding testing their hospital workers because they were afraid they would have to send everyone home, and as a result not have a workforce."

Capacity

Jeremy Hunt, committee chair and former health secretary, asked England's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, who also appeared before the committee, why he had not recommended introducing routine regular testing for all healthcare staff.

Whitty said, "Initially we didn't have the capacity. Even now, we would be at the margins of capacity were we to do routine testing for all healthcare staff on a more than very occasional basis, but that is improving so the capacity constraints are being eased.

"I'm not against routine testing of healthcare workers, but there are things which are variables—we do not yet know what is the correct rate of doing this, when to do it at different epidemiological levels, what kinds of incidents we need to worry about."

MPs asked what the UK had not done in the first five weeks of the pandemic that other countries had done better.

Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust and adviser on the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), said, "I think the UK was slow to put in place testing, to put in place extra clinical capacity, and to make sure that healthcare workers were protected with the PPE."

Farrar said that complacency was currently the real danger. "It remains as infectious as at the end of December, it has the same clinical syndrome, it kills the same number of people and, as soon as the lockdowns ease, if we don't have mechanisms to change the fundamentals—that means diagnostics, testing, treatments, and vaccines—then this will come back in winter."