COVID MUTATIONS AND PANDEMIC CONTROL

Covid mutations: honest approach needed from politicians and scientists on pandemic outlook

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Over the past year the government has enthusiastically told us about getting control over the pandemic through “ramping up testing,” “world beating tracing,” “breakthrough drugs,” and “game changing vaccinations” to name a few preferred phrases.¹ ²

Scientists from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and other agencies have been more circumspect, using phrases such as “we are going to have to live with this virus for a long time,”³ though they are often vague on the details of what this means.

Neither politicians nor scientists should be criticised too harshly for how they approach questions about how we get out of this pandemic. The government is compelled to be optimistic to maintain the nation’s morale and help adherence to restrictions. Similarly, scientists, by their very nature, are cautious.

There is, however, a need to be honest with the public. Vaccine trials and emerging evidence from Israel suggest that vaccination programmes will bring about a significant decrease in infection rates and mortality.⁴ However, the coronavirus is mutating fast⁵ and it is likely that a strain will emerge that will render current vaccines less effective, and ultimately ineffective.

There will be a cycle of mutation and new vaccine development which will hopefully keep deaths down to an “acceptable” level. Vaccinations should not, however, be viewed as a magic bullet. No single intervention will get us out of this. If we are truthful then, perhaps for the next two years or so, social distancing, masks, and temporary restrictions will become the norm. This is a bitter pill to swallow for a liberal democracy such as ours. If the public is told this more often and unambiguously, it will be better informed and more likely to adhere.

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¹ Tolhurst A, Langford E. PMQs: Boris Johnson claims UK will have “world beating” system to trace 10 000 coronavirus cases per day ready by 1 June. Politics Home. 20 May 2020. www.politicshome.com/news/article/pm-claims-uk-will-have-worldbeating-test-track-and-trace-system-up-and-running-by-1-june


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