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Covid-19: Data on vaccination rollout and its effects are vital to gauge progress, say scientists

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Scientists have called for more data on the rollout of covid-19 vaccinations in the UK to be released to show how it is working together with details of a long term strategy for ending the pandemic.

Members of Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Independent SAGE) have voiced concerns about an absence of a coherent policy to control the spread of covid-19 amid reliance on emergency lockdowns and promises that “vaccines are coming.”

Christina Pagel, professor of operational research at University College London, said that the vaccination programme should be accelerated, but knowing the numbers of people getting vaccinated was just one part of the picture. She said it was also vital to know their age, ethnicity, where they lived and how deprived those areas were, and who was turning down vaccination. “We need to know where there are pockets of people who aren’t getting vaccinated, where there are communities that we’re not protecting and not reaching, and how can we change that?” she said at Independent SAGE’s weekly briefing on 8 January. The government has pledged a first vaccine for 13 million vulnerable people in four top priority groups by mid-February.

Pagel said, “We need a lot more data to understand that rollout. We need to know how much vaccine is on order, when we are going to get it, can we get to the two million a week, can we get to more than that? We need to know how much vaccine isn’t used every week, and whether there are ways we can make sure we use every single vial of vaccine.”

As the programme matured it was crucial to “start measuring and reporting the impact,” for the benefit of the UK as well as other countries on vaccination regimes, she said. Data were needed on covid-19 cases, hospital admissions, and deaths by age groups and on whether those people had been vaccinated or not, plus details on ethnicity, deprivation, and region and separate, detailed statistics for health and care workers.

The briefing was aired on the day that the UK reported its highest death toll from covid-19 so far and with levels of hospital admissions continuing to soar, especially in London. Pagel said, “The vaccination programme will save a lot of lives, which is a really good thing, but over 75s are generally not the main spreaders of covid-19. About 75% of patients in intensive care units are under 75, so we’re going to have to get cases down everywhere to try and relieve pressure on hospitals,” said Page.

Gabriel Scally, visiting professor of public health at the University of Bristol, raised concerns that the enthusiasm for vaccination would lower vigilance

about spreading the virus. He said it was “negligent” of the government not to have established an effective find, test, trace, isolate, and support system and guarantee help for the most affected communities.

Anthony Costello, professor of global health and sustainable development at UCL, said that tougher lockdown measures were needed. “We should have a total clampdown now because we have no health service functioning. We’ve got to get on top of this pandemic and the longer we allow it to go transmitting as we are at the moment the quicker we’re going to get a resistant virus to a vaccine,” he said.

Stephen Reicher, professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews, said, “We need a strategy, we need to be proactive, we need to get ahead of the virus, and at the moment we’re simply being responsive and responding with emergency measures, which won’t get on top of the virus in the long term.”