CONCERN ABOUT LATERAL FLOW TEST USE

Covid-19 pilot events: the pursuit of outcomes

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As covid-19 incidence rates decrease and vaccination coverage increases, the UK is looking to re-commence large events such as business meetings and crowd attendance at sports venues. We note the image of the spectator crowd attending the English League Cup final on 25 April 2021 alongside an article in the 1 May edition of The BMJ. This event occurred as part of the government’s events research programme as a pilot event to investigate the safe return of supporters to stadiums. Measures to mitigate the risk of covid-19 transmission at the event included pre-attendance lateral flow tests and the wearing of face coverings in the stadium.

The image depicted approximately 125 spectators with evident limitations of social distancing. Approximately half \( (n=60) \) seemed to be wearing face coverings correctly. Approximately 29\% \( (n=36) \) were observed not to be wearing face coverings correctly (no mask or mask without coverage of both mouth and nose). The remaining people’s faces could not be seen. This is a crowd that is likely to be shouting encouragement, or possibly singing, resulting in projecting respiratory droplets across further distances. Furthermore, the limitations of mass sampling of asymptomatic populations have been reported in The BMJ on several occasions.

We welcome the return of events, but we also want to emphasise the need to interpret the outcomes of these pilot events in context. The absence of linked covid-19 cases or clusters after the pilot events, for example, might be because no infectious people were present at the time, rather than an accurate measure of the success of the mitigation measures imposed. We ask that those evaluating these pilot events bear in mind the limitations of the data that they are able to collect and the real world adherence to non-drug intervention measures. This is vital to ensure that the public and health protection organisations are informed of the residual risk.

Competing interests: Both authors work for Public Health Wales and are re-deployed to the health protection covid-19 response. LD has provided health protection input to planned pilot events in Wales. The authors declare no financial conflicts of interest.

1 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: MHRA is concerned over use of rapid lateral flow devices for mass testing. BMJ 2021;373:n1090. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1090 pmid: 33910913

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