Covid-19: “Complete nonsense” to say government shielded care homes, says PM’s former aide

Gareth Iacobucci

The UK government’s assertion that it placed a protective shield around care homes in the first wave of the covid-19 pandemic is “complete nonsense,” the prime minister’s former chief adviser has claimed.

Speaking to MPs on 26 May in front of the parliamentary health and science select committees’ inquiry into lessons learnt from the pandemic, Dominic Cummings said he was shocked in April 2020 to find that care home residents were not being tested before being sent back to care homes. We only subsequently found out that that hadn’t happened.

“The government rhetoric was, ‘We put a shield around care homes’ and ‘Blah, blah, blah’—it was complete nonsense. Quite the opposite of putting a shield around them, we sent people with covid back to care homes.”

In England and Wales more than 42 000 people have died within 28 days of a positive result from a covid-19 test in care homes. Many deaths that occurred early in the pandemic have been attributed to the lack of testing of people discharged from hospital.

“I’m sure some people were tested,” Cummings said. “But obviously many, many people who should have been not tested and then went back to care homes and then infected people, and then it spread like wildfire inside the care homes.”

Cummings told MPs that England’s health secretary, Matt Hancock, had previously assured him and the prime minister, Boris Johnson, that care home residents would be tested before being discharged. He said, “We were told categorically in March [2020] that people would be tested before they went back to care homes. We only subsequently found out that that hadn’t happened.

“That the government rhetoric was, ‘We put a shield around care homes’ and ‘Blah, blah, blah’—it was complete nonsense. Quite the opposite of putting a shield around them, we sent people with covid back to care homes.”

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“My recollection of events is that I committed to delivering that testing for people going from hospital into care homes when we could do it,” Hancock said.

“I then went away and built the testing capacity . . . and then delivered on the commitment that I made.”

Earlier that day in the Commons Hancock responded to this and several other accusations made by Cummings, including that Hancock had falsely accused NHS England’s chief Simon Stevens and the Treasury of blocking orders of PPE and lied about access to treatment during the first wave of the pandemic.1

Hancock said, “These unsubstantiated allegations around honesty are not true. What we have done to handle this coronavirus pandemic has been unprecedented in modern times.

“Throughout, we have been straight with people and straight with this House about the challenges that we as a nation face together. Of course, there were unprecedented difficulties that come with preparation for an unprecedented event.”


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