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Covid-19: Pandemic will cast “a long shadow” on mental health, warns England’s CMO

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The covid-19 pandemic will continue to impact mental health and the provision of psychiatric services for a considerable period, England’s chief medical officer has warned.

Speaking at the Royal College of Psychiatrists international congress, held online on 23 June, Chris Whitty stressed that even if the pandemic were to end now, it would cast “a long shadow on mental health, on provision for mental health, on our understanding of disease, and the research elements that will arise from it.”

Whitty said the pandemic had led to considerable fear and public anxiety—particularly at the start of the first wave—and noted the impact of national lockdowns on people’s social support and financial vulnerability. “The mental health elements of the lockdowns and public anxiety were often underplayed,” he told delegates.

He described difficulties for people who required formal mental health care who may have had less access to face to face consultations, struggled to obtain medication in lockdown, and faced reductions of their informal support through friends and family. “Something that is different is the chronic nature of this pandemic. This has gone on now for 18 months and will continue.” Whitty added. “This has provided a significant challenge to the provision of mental health services, and a very significant sense of exacerbating factors for previous mental health conditions.”

Whitty also noted that while there is an ending in sight to the pandemic, it is closer in high income settings than low income settings.

“Covid is going to continue causing significant waves, even assuming we don’t get any major vaccine escape mutations, for the rest of 2021, into 2022, and possibly 2023.” He reiterated recent warnings¹ that there would continue to be difficulties in the medium and long term, but that high income countries may learn to manage the virus and live with it as a mainly seasonal disease that is largely controlled by polyvariant vaccinations. “In high income countries, I expect that the impact of vaccination over the next few months will mean that the current wave we are getting from the delta variant, which is undoubtedly going to reach some height in the UK, will have much less impact than previous waves,” though he added that this impact would still be substantial.

¹ Iacobucci G. Covid-19: Prepare for a third wave, warns England’s chief medical officer. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1577. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1577 pmid: 34144962

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