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PRIMARY COLOUR

Helen Salisbury: How's your appetite for risk?

Helen Salisbury *GP*

People vary in their appetite for risk. Some people's idea of fun is paragliding or rock climbing, whereas I'd opt for a gentle jog followed by a good book. In my spare time I can enjoy the luxury of control over how much risk I take, and although I may sometimes feel anxious about the choices of others, I generally support their right to choose.

That degree of control doesn't extend to all spheres of our lives, where we often depend on the actions of others for our safety. No matter how carefully I drive, this won't protect me from injury if a tired lorry driver nods off at the wheel—something that may become more likely after the relaxation of driving regulations proposed this week.¹

The suggestion that people's behaviour regarding covid-19 is a matter of personal appetite for risk, after the planned removal of restrictions next week, is dangerously wide of the mark. It assumes that people have a far greater degree of control over their exposure than they really do. I've modified my risk by being vaccinated, which will make me less likely to become severely ill or infect others in my household. However, the risk is reduced, not negated: this distinction has been made very clear by the experience of a colleague who has been admitted to hospital with covid-19 despite being fully vaccinated.²

I'm lucky in that I don't need public transport to travel to work, I spend my days in a well ventilated building, and I can insist that others there wear masks. Not everyone has those freedoms and choices, and if they're immunosuppressed and therefore unable to mount a good response to the vaccine, they rely on the actions of others to keep them safe.³ The rising numbers of cases and the increased transmissibility of the delta variant put this group in a very difficult position.² The new health secretary has suggested that such patients should ask their GP for advice, but I'm not sure what I should tell a shopworker or bus driver taking methotrexate.⁴ I can't be precise about their degree of risk, nor the effect on their income or employment if they decide to stay at home once the majority of covid restrictions are gone.

However ruggedly individualistic your politics, a pandemic really does bring home how reliant all people are on those around them for their safety and health. SARS-CoV-2 is airborne, and a mask protects others far more than it protects the wearer. Unfortunately, not everyone understands this, and some will have little consideration for the vulnerability of others, although the government insists that guidance on mask wearing will remain. We need to keep the rules on mask wearing in indoor spaces and on public transport, and ensure that the

messaging is clear, if we want to avoid a further spike in admissions and the deaths of vulnerable patients.

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