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Winter will be “exceptionally difficult” for NHS irrespective of covid, Chris Whitty warns

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The NHS will have an “exceptionally difficult” winter, whether there is another covid-19 surge or a slump, England’s chief medical adviser, Chris Whitty, has warned.

Speaking at the Royal College of General Practice’s annual conference in Liverpool on 14 October, Whitty said, “I wish I could claim it will all be fantastic by Christmas, but sadly I’m afraid [I can’t].”

It’s still unclear how bad the flu season will be, and covid-19 was only “two to three doubling times away” from putting serious pressure on the NHS, he said.

Regarding the flu season, Whitty said that people were still generally meeting fewer others than they did two years ago, which could keep infection rates low. However, the population also had less natural immunity. “We could have a really serious spike and a flu vaccine that’s not very well matched to the flu we get, because there hasn’t been enough flu circulating in the southern hemisphere to really get a proper fix on this,” he explained.

On top of that, the NHS will be dealing with other serious respiratory infections, the usual winter pressures, the people who have delayed seeking medical attention and therefore are more seriously ill, catching up on routine services that had been delayed, such as screening, and the vaccination programmes.

“That’s an extraordinarily tall order when you add all those up,” Whitty said, noting that without the hard work of GPs during the past two difficult years it would have been “catastrophically worse.”

Health secretary absent

Whitty was due to speak at the conference after the health and social care secretary for England, Sajid Javid, but Javid pulled out of attending at the last minute. The health secretary’s failure to appear has been widely criticised by GPs, especially as it came on the day he announced the general practice “rescue package.” The plan has pledged an extra £250m (€295m; \$340m) to increase the proportion of appointments that practices deliver face to face and will require local commissioners to identify the 20% of practices in their area that have the lowest levels of such appointments.¹

A member of the executive team of the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee, Farah Jameel, said, “The fact that Sajid Javid failed to keep his promise to address doctors at the RCGP conference tells you everything we need to know about this health secretary. He is running scared of speaking to the profession face to face because he knows his plan is, in reality, no plan at all.

“The secretary of state had the perfect opportunity today to stand up and defend his so called ‘rescue package’ and hear at first hand what GPs thought of it. But ducking out of the conference shows he wasn’t willing or, in reality, able to defend the indefensible.”

1 Iacobucci G. Government’s “rescue package” will prompt more GPs to quit, leaders warn. *BMJ* 2021;375:n2517.

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