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We need to talk about shielders: five minutes with . . . Lucy Watson

The chair of the Patients Association says the changing advice during the pandemic has left many vulnerable patients feeling confused and abandoned

Zosia Kmietowicz

“People in England who are clinically extremely vulnerable and at highest risk of becoming severely ill from covid-19 were advised in March 2020 to stay at home as much as possible, including not going to work if they cannot work at home, and only to leave the house to exercise outdoors or to attend health appointments.¹ By February 2021, when the list was extended, four million people were shielding.² But patients have told us that the list and the advice was unsatisfactory and confusing. Some people were not sure why they were on the list while others wondered why they were not being offered any support with food and medicine deliveries.

“Covid restrictions in England were lifted on ‘Freedom Day,’ 19 July 2021, and the shielding programme ended in September, meaning that people who had been told to take extra precautions to protect themselves against covid no longer needed to. While there was some advice for people who considered themselves extremely vulnerable—such as avoiding crowded places—the latest announcement on easing plan B restrictions from 27 January,³ makes no mention of patients who shielded for months to protect themselves and the NHS.

“Patients have told the association that they have felt left behind and abandoned by health services as advice on restrictions and shielding has changed. In a survey by the Patients Association of nearly 1000 people over summer 2020 patients reported that they found access to services became very difficult after restrictions were introduced, when their health appointments were cancelled and they had no contact with services with many saying they felt unsupported, anxious, and lonely.³ Crucially, patients said that their relationship with the NHS had been significantly disrupted.

“After restrictions were lifted, when vaccinations were rolled out, people who had shielded continued to feel vulnerable because mask wearing and social distancing suddenly disappeared. It also became clear that vaccines might not offer the same level of protection to some people who were immunocompromised, and many continued to shield as they felt they had no other choice.

“Many patients have told us that they were continuing to shield despite the advice for them to do so being lifted.⁴ Our response has been to advise patients to see their doctor to agree a plan of care on how to keep healthy and well—to have a conversation based on understanding the risks to their health of getting covid-19 and what they can do to reduce this risk so that they can balance this with the risks of not seeing family or friends on their own wellbeing and

having an impaired quality of life. These decisions will be different for each person and their family.

“Practices got lists of supposedly vulnerable patients from NHS England but the data that is held was either insufficiently robust or too blunt. Identifying people who are clinically vulnerable and have complex needs relies on the accuracy and detail at the data level. This is not going to be the last pandemic and it’s important to get the data on vulnerable patients right now. This data will also be useful for delivering care plans and monitoring hospital admissions. It would be good to see the NHS listening to patients’ experience of the pandemic, especially those shielding, so that the NHS can improve how it advises and supports vulnerable patients in the event of a future pandemic. But, as a point of principle, we’d like the NHS always to listen and work in partnership with patients.”

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- 2 Wise J. Covid-19: Extra 1.7 million people in England are asked to shield. *BMJ* 2021;372:n467. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n467 pmid: 33597119
- 3 Patients Association. Pandemic patient experience UK patient experience of health, care and other support during the covid-19 pandemic. September 2020. www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx.
- 4 Wise J. Covid-19: England prepares to ease plan B restrictions. *BMJ* 2022;376:o163. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o163 pmid: 35058234