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Removing free access to covid-19 tests is incomprehensible

Rather than withdrawing vital measures to protect us from covid-19, the government should instead focus on getting them right, writes Maggie Rae

Maggie Rae,

Throughout the covid-19 pandemic we have seen a chronic failure from the government to deliver clear public health messaging in support of an effective, long term strategy to combat covid-19. Policy has often been rushed, and the latest ill conceived decision to scrap free covid-19 testing and end covid-19 restrictions represents a dangerous knee-jerk reaction.

With daily numbers of people contracting covid-19 across the UK above 25,000 and with over 8,000 people in hospital over the past week with covid-19, it is no surprise that there are still hundreds of deaths per day relating to covid-19.¹ Public health professionals continue to see the impacts of covid-19 across our local, regional, national, and global populations. This pandemic then, is far from over—and any message from the government contradicting this fact will result in further avoidable deaths.

We have made hard won progress in our efforts to tackle covid-19 following the deployment of effective public health interventions including surveillance, physical distancing, messaging on hygiene and reducing transmission, and of course through vaccination. The consequences of prematurely stepping down these measures are severe.

If the government's mission remains to protect the NHS and save lives, a decision to remove free access to covid-19 tests is incomprehensible. Not only will such a decision cost lives and put pressure on an NHS which is facing severe capacity issues, it will also stretch the health inequalities that have already been exacerbated by the pandemic.

An effective testing strategy is one that is sophisticated in its design and able to target the areas where it is most needed. The government's previous failure has been to overspend on huge-scale indiscriminate testing, placing billions of pounds in the hands of private companies.² We now see the inverse of this failure, with the government set to prevent access to testing for the most deprived in our society by withdrawing free access to covid-19 tests.

Among those under 65, the covid-19 mortality rate in the most deprived areas of the UK has been four times higher than in the least deprived.³ This is owing to a huge range of converging factors including inadequate support to isolate where necessary, poor access to health and care services, poor quality overcrowded housing, and barriers to vaccine uptake. Adding further disadvantage to these populations already struggling to protect themselves from covid-19 by removing access to free covid-19 tests will lead to

further disparities between communities across the UK.

While disadvantaged groups will face the most severe consequences of the government's decision, ending access to free covid-19 tests will have national and international consequences. New variants of covid-19 continue to emerge, as we have seen with the BA.2 sub-variant of omicron, and there is no reason that we should see this trend stop anytime soon. Rather, it is likely that we will continue to see new strains of the virus emerge and infect our populations. Compromising our most important surveillance tools means that we in turn, compromise our ability to respond to new variants of concern and adapt our approaches to best defend ourselves against the continued threat of covid-19.

In addition to the practical impact on the ability of disadvantaged communities to protect themselves against covid-19, and compromising our crucial ability to monitor the spread of the virus, this latest move from the government sends a dangerous message to the public that the pandemic is now over. Those of us who work in health and care settings know this is far from true. It is critical that the public continues to follow public health measures on covid-19 such as wearing facemasks, practising good hand hygiene, isolating when unwell, and alerting test and trace services if they contract covid-19. The message that the public will glean from a scrapped testing system is that these measures are no longer necessary.

If the government seeks to save lives, rather than withdrawing vital measures to protect us from covid-19, it should instead focus on getting them right. We need a testing system which is free at the point of access for those who need it, targets high-risk populations, and is able to quickly identify spikes of infections and new variants. We also need to urgently address issues of vaccine equity, with data showing us that those in the most deprived areas of the UK are over twice as likely to be unvaccinated as those in the least deprived. Rather than opaque messages signalling that the government views the pandemic response as having reached its end, we should instead have a solid long term plan to address the current issues we face, boost vaccine uptake, and protect the public's health.

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1 Coronavirus in the UK. <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>

2 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: One in five government contracts had signs of possible corruption, report finds. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1072. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1072. pmid: 33893123

- 3 Mahase E. Covid-19: Adults in poorest areas are almost four times more likely to die, inquiry finds. *BMJ* 2021;374:n1728. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1728. pmid: 34233890