Seven days in medicine: 13-19 July

Covid-19
BMA calls for long term plan to keep cases low
The BMA urged the UK government to develop a long term plan to keep covid cases at low levels after the latest Office for National Statistics survey showed that an estimated one in 19 people in England, one in 17 in Wales and Northern Ireland, and one in 16 in Scotland tested positive in the week to 6 July. Philip Banfield, BMA council chair, said, “There must be recognition from the government that heightened waves of infection lead to greater staff illness and absences, stretching health and care settings to the limit and beyond.”

Over 50s to get autumn vaccine booster
The UK government accepted the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to offer an autumn covid booster to over 50s, care home staff and residents, frontline health and care workers, unpaid carers, people in clinical risk groups aged 5-49 years, and household contacts of immunosuppressed people. Those eligible for a flu vaccine will also be expanded to everyone aged 50 or over, primary school children and secondary school pupils in years 7-9, as well as people in clinical risk groups, unpaid carers, and household contacts of immunosuppressed people.

Mesothelioma
NICE recommends life extending treatment
The UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published final draft guidance recommending nivolumab (Opdivo) with ipilimumab (Yervoy) as a first line treatment for unresectable malignant pleural mesothelioma in adults. Most cases of this rare and aggressive form of cancer are linked to occupational exposure to asbestos. It is estimated that more than 600 people in England could benefit from the intravenous treatment. Clinical trial results show that on average people having nivolumab plus ipilimumab survive for four months longer than those having chemotherapy, the current standard first line treatment.

Supplemental oxygen
Study shows racial inequalities in administration
A cohort study of 3069 patients in an intensive care unit in the US found that Asian, black, and Hispanic patients received significantly less supplemental oxygen for a given average haemoglobin oxygen saturation than white patients. The research, published in *JAMA Internal Medicine,* found that the differences were associated with pulse oximeter performance. The data were from 2008 to 2019 and so there were no patients with covid-19. However, the researchers said hidden hypoxaemia may contribute to racial and ethnic inequalities in care seen in the pandemic.

Health inequalities
Welsh organisations call for action plan
Fifty organisations, including the Welsh NHS Confederation and the Royal College of Physicians, called on the Welsh government to produce a plan to reduce poverty and tackle inequalities. A report, *Mind the Gap: What’s Stopping Change?* said that as the everyday cost of living continued to rise, an increase in poverty and inequality would lead to greater strain on people’s health and the NHS. The report came as a YouGov poll found that 60% of people in Wales believed their health to have been negatively affected by the rising cost of living.

Alcohol
Young people face higher health risks than older adults
A new analysis from the Global Burden of Diseases study found that 59.1% of people who consumed unsafe amounts of alcohol in 2020 were aged 15-39, with three quarters of them male. For adults over 40, consuming a small amount of alcohol (one to two small glasses of red wine) can provide some health benefits, such as reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, said the study. The authors wrote in the *Lancet* that alcohol consumption recommendations should be based on age and location, with the strictest guidelines targeted at men and boys under 40.

NHS pressures
Ambulance response and hospital waiting times continue to rise
Ambulance response times across all incident types continue to rise. Ambulance response times across all incident types continue to rise.

Learning disabilities
Report highlights avoidable deaths
People with a learning disability continue to have a much shorter life expectancy than the wider general public, with six in 10 dying before age 65, compared with one in 10 in the general population, said the sixth annual report of the learning from life and death reviews programme (LeDeR). People with epilepsy and from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to die younger. Around half of all deaths of people with a learning disability were deemed to be avoidable, compared with less than a quarter in the general population.
Vaccination

Childhood rates decline globally, figures show

Coverage of the third dose of diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP3), a marker for immunisation coverage, fell worldwide from 86% in 2019 to 81% in 2021, the lowest since 2008. The latest estimates from the World Health Organization and Unicef show that 25 million children were unvaccinated or undervaccinated in 2021, with 18 million not receiving any vaccines. Many factors contributed to the decline, including an increased number of children living in conflict and fragile settings, increased vaccine misinformation, and covid-19 related issues such as service and supply chain disruptions.  

NHS 111

Online service made no difference to call handlers’ workload

The introduction of an online version of NHS 111 in England made no discernible difference to the workload of the existing telephone helpline service being provided to the public, a study published in BMJ Open concluded. The analysis, by researchers from Sheffield University, also suggested that use of the online service could cause an increase in the number of ambulance dispatches overall if online users followed its advice. On average, for every 1000 online contacts the number of recommendations for an ambulance response was 6.7% higher than with telephone contacts. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.o1729)

Mental health

Psychiatrists call for better workplace support

The Royal College of Psychiatrists described what a “good” workplace looks like, as part of a drive to help people with mental health challenges to stay in or return to work. As well as offering standard benefits such as job security, an appropriate wage, positive work-life balance, opportunities for career progression, and supportive mental health and wellbeing policies, workplaces should actively support employees with existing mental health disorders. This may be done by offering flexible working policies and appropriate reasonable adjustments, as well as access to counselling and support services. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.o1746)

GP pensions

Treasury sympathetic to call for action on unfair charges

The Treasury agreed to look at one quirk of the NHS Pension Scheme that leaves some doctors subject to unfair pension tax charges that are based on “pseudo-growth” of their pensions. Richard Fuller, economic secretary to the Treasury, made the commitment during a debate at the House of Commons that was called to highlight the detrimental effect that soaring inflation will have on the medical workforce, by forcing doctors to cut their hours or retire early. (Full story doi:10.1136/bmj.o1766)