

Our vaccination programme is a national success story

Today marks 12 weeks since Margaret Keenan became the first person in the world to receive a clinically approved vaccine for COVID-19. She has since been joined by over 20 million other citizens of this country in the biggest and fastest vaccination effort the world has ever seen.

This is a phenomenal achievement. Our vaccination programme is a national success story for the whole United Kingdom, and the reason it matters is that it allows us to replace the protection currently given by restrictions on our freedoms with the protection from science.

The data confirms that this strategy is working because the vaccines work. The number of hospital admissions is falling faster than the number of new cases, whereas in the first peak it fell more slowly, and the fall in hospitalisations is faster among the age groups vaccinated first than in younger age groups yet to get a jab.

I can tell the House about some further analysis that backs up this excellent news. The halving time of hospital admissions is now every 18 days. Over the past fortnight, it has fallen for those aged over 85 from 18 days to 15. This morning, the Office for National Statistics published data showing the number of deaths falling by over a quarter a week in mid-February. More than that, the number of deaths each day is not only falling faster than after the first peak, but it is falling faster in the over-80s, who got the jab first, compared with the under-80s.

The number of daily deaths is halving every 12 days, but among the over-80s it is now halving every 10, so while the fall in cases is decelerating, the fall in the number of deaths is accelerating. What all this shows is that the vaccine is working, reducing the number of deaths among those who were vaccinated first and preventing hospital admissions. This is real-world evidence that the vaccine is protecting the NHS and saving lives, that the 12-week dosing regime is saving lives, and that this country's strategy is working.

As well as this real-world data, I would like to update the House on 2 new pieces of analytical research published over the last 24 hours. First, this morning the Office for National Statistics published new data on the levels of protection people have. They show that up to 11 February, 1 in 4 people are estimated to have antibodies against coronavirus in England, up from 1 in 5. The levels are highest in the over-80s, the first group to be vaccinated, showing again the protection from the vaccine across the country.

The second piece of research, published last night, shows that a single dose of either the Oxford or the Pfizer vaccine delivers protection against severe infection in the over-70s, with a more than 80% reduction in hospitalisations. It is great news that both vaccines work so effectively. In

fact, the protection from catching COVID 35 days after the first jab is even slightly better for the Oxford jab than for the Pfizer, so people can have confidence that they will get protection, whichever jab they are offered.

I am grateful for the work of colleagues across the House in promoting vaccine take-up, which has helped to deliver some of the highest levels of enthusiasm for vaccination in the whole world, and I am pleased to inform the House that we are now inviting over-60s to be vaccinated too. Although the day-to-day figures for supply are lumpy, we have some bumper weeks ahead later this month. Given that our vaccination programme began 12 weeks ago today, from now we begin in earnest our programme of second vaccinations, which ramps up over the month of March. I can assure the House that we have factored these second jabs into our supply projections, and we are on track to meet our target of offering a vaccine to all priority groups 1 to 9 by 15 April and to all adults by the end of July.

Our vaccination programme means that we can set out our road map to freedom and put this pandemic behind us – but we must stay vigilant because COVID-19, like all viruses, mutates over time. Part of controlling any virus is responding to new variants as they arise, just as we do with flu each year. Knowing this, we invested in genomic sequencing right at the start of the pandemic, giving the UK one of the biggest genomic sequencing capabilities in the world. Thanks to that, we have been able to spot variants here at home and support others to detect variants in other parts of the world.

I would like to update the House on the 6 cases of the variant of concern that was first identified in Manaus in Brazil and that we have now identified here in the UK. We know that 5 of those 6 people quarantined at home, as they were legally required to do. We have been in contact with them, and I would like to put on record my gratitude to them for doing their duty and following the rules. Whenever we identify cases of a new variant, we respond fast and come down hard by bringing in enhanced sequencing and testing, so we are stepping up our testing and sequencing in south Gloucestershire as a precaution. We have no information to suggest that the variant has spread further.

Unfortunately, 1 of the 6 cases completed a test but did not successfully complete the contact details. Incidents like this are rare and occur only in around 0.1% of tests. I can update the House with the latest information on identifying this case. We have identified the batch of home test kits in question, and our search has narrowed from the whole country down to 379 households in the south east of England. We are contacting each one. We are grateful that a number of potential cases have come forward following the call that we put out over the weekend, and I would like to thank colleagues from across the House who have helped us to get the message out there.

Our current vaccines have not yet been studied against this variant. We are working to understand what impact it might have, but we do know that the variant has caused significant challenges in Brazil, so we are doing all we can to stop the spread of this new variant in the UK, to analyse its effects, to develop an updated vaccine that works on all these variants of concern, and to protect the progress that we have made as a nation. This country is on

the road to recovery and we have freedom on the horizon. We must proceed with caution because although we are moving quickly, the virus moves quickly too. Let us not waver. Let us do whatever it takes to keep this virus under control.