

The credibility of the science

I admire the work done by medics and scientists who study disease in getting to a much better understanding of this virus quickly, and in finding some treatments and some potential vaccines that can help tame it. These offer the establishment's way out from lockdowns. I am urging the government to do more on treatments, as we are still due test results for various medicines which might help fight the disease.

I have been less impressed by the epidemiologists and modellers working for the government, who have produced high and worrying numbers which even they have had to amend or shade. They have had problems compiling and publishing reliable figures to plot the disease, had trouble designing reliable tests to see how much of the disease is around, and have chopped and changed definitions even for something as important as deaths. In the early months they delighted in publishing comparisons with other countries that seemed to exaggerate the UK figures in a negative direction as numbers were not calculated on the same basis for each country. There was also a time when there seemed to be facilitation to maximise the number of death certificates saying died "with CV 19" rather than died of CV 19. There have been big arguments amongst scientists over the speed and method of spread and the likely future course of transmission of the disease, with very different forecasts.

It is most important that the public have trust in the official scientists and advisers. This is more likely if they treat the public as adults, explain what they do not know as well as what they know, leave scope for individual risk assessment and judgement, and try not to change requirements or strong advice unless they find they were wrong and need to tell us that.

The advisers did change their stance on mask wearing, from telling us they did not do much or any good to saying we must wear them in enclosed public places. They shifted from emphasis on picking up the virus through your hands, with the need for hand washing and much sterilisation of surfaces, to emphasis on airborne virus picked up from sharing airspace with infected people. This is understandable as their knowledge improves or changes, but does lead more people to ask if the latest iteration of the advice is good advice. It is likely to be true you can catch the virus both ways and so need to be careful both ways.

Today these same scientific advisers have persuaded Ministers to back them again with recommendations for more severe lockdowns, maybe continuing all the way through to April next year. This is why their advice needs challenging, as the cost to livelihoods and businesses will be considerable if this is followed. What evidence do they have that the worst transmission now occurs through hospitality venues rather than through everyday social contact? There is much contact through schools and universities staying open, through family gatherings and through the many businesses that do need people to go to a place of work so our power stays on and our food is on the shelves. How much transmission is occurring through rule breaking with people

holding unofficial parties, entertainments and events?

The government advisers have always seemed to want a vaccine and to want as many of us as possible out of circulation until a vaccine arrives. They need to help the government and the rest of us to live with this virus whilst various vaccines are rolled out in ways which minimise deaths and serious cases whilst allowing as much normal life as possible.

I am pressing again for the results of work the government has said it is doing on safer indoor environments through better air extraction systems, best practice on how to run shops, gyms, events in a socially distanced way, and recommended standards for protective clothing for different tasks. What is the latest thinking on the use of UV machines for removing the virus from places where people meet? I will look tomorrow at the big issue of NHS capacity.