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# Official data is 'exaggerating' the risk of Covid, 500 academics say

*Joe Davies*

7-9 minutes

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Official data is 'exaggerating' the risk of Covid-19 and talk of a second wave is 'misleading', nearly 500 academics told [Boris Johnson](#) in open letter attacking [lockdown](#).

The doctors and scientists said the Government's response to the [coronavirus](#) pandemic has become 'disproportionate' and that mass testing has distorted the risk of the virus.

They said tests are likely to be producing high numbers of 'false positive' results and the Government must do more to put infection and death rates within the context of normal seasonal rates.

The letter criticised the Government's handling of coronavirus for 'causing more harm than good'.

Official data is 'exaggerating' the risk of Covid-19 and talk of a second wave is 'misleading', nearly 500 academics told Boris Johnson (pictured on Friday) in open letter attacking lockdown

It comes after the UK yesterday confirmed a further 24,957 positive Covid tests, up just 13.9 per cent on last week's total.

Top scientists suggested the UK's second wave of coronavirus has already peaked.

Professor Tim Spector, who leads the Covid Symptom Study app aiming to track the spread of Covid-19 in the UK, confirmed that there were 'positive signs' the country has 'passed the peak of the second wave'.

The open letter to the Prime Minister was signed by 469 medics and is titled First Do No Harm - the medical principle that a cure must never be worse than the disease itself.

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It is signed by immunologist Dr Charlotte R Bell, paediatrician Dr Rosamond Jones, consultant surgeon and Keith Willison, Professor of Chemical Biology at Imperial College.

The letter reads: 'The management of the crisis has become disproportionate and is now causing more harm than good.

'We urge policy-makers to remember that this pandemic, like all pandemics, will eventually pass but the social and psychological damage that it is causing risks becoming permanent.

'After the initial justifiable response to Covid-19, the evidence base now shows a different picture.

'The problem of functional false positive rates has still not been addressed and particularly in the context of low prevalence of disease whereby false positives are likely to exceed true positives substantially and moreover correlate poorly with the person being infectious.

'Alongside this we have the issue that it is normal to see an increase in illness and deaths during the winter months.

'It is notable that [the] UK death rate is currently sitting around average for this time of year. The use of the term 'second wave' is therefore misleading.

'We have the knowledge to enable a policy that protects the elderly and vulnerable without increasing all other health and economic harms and which is not at the expense our whole way of life and particularly that of the nation's children.'

The open letter was organised by the parent campaign UsForThem and Recovery, a new group opposing strong coronavirus restrictions.

It comes amid warnings that the country needed 'dramatic action' to reduce Covid-19 transmission, despite the Government's 'ghastly' presentation of data to justify the latest lockdown.

Today's case numbers saw a rise of just 3,045 on last Saturday's total of 21,915.

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Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter said it would not be sustainable for the health service to deal with the levels of coronavirus cases and hospitalisations without tougher measures than those imposed under the three-tier system.

The statistician and chair of the Winton Centre for risk and

evidence communication at the University of Cambridge told BBC Radio 4's Today Programme: 'If this is going to go down, it is going to go down very slowly unless some dramatic action is taken, which has been taken.'

Meanwhile, hundreds of people have been tested as part of a pilot mass coronavirus testing programme in Liverpool, with queues outside new test centres.

The armed forces have been brought in to the city to help deliver the scheme, which uses lateral flow tests to deliver results in under an hour for people who are not showing symptoms of the virus.

Mr Johnson has said the rapid testing pilot could be a 'real way forward through the crisis'.

The R rate of the coronavirus dropped in five regions of England this week - except London and the South East, where it did not change - and stayed stable at between 1.1 and 1.3 in England and the UK as a whole. Last week marked a drop from 1.2 to 1.4 the week before

But health experts said plans to screen the population of Liverpool were not fit for purpose.

Sir David said: 'The point is we are getting about 20-25,000 positive tests a day, that feeds through to about 1,500 hospitalisations a day, about 250-300 deaths a day and these are broadly stable but going up a bit - the deaths in hospitals and hospitalisations are going up slowly - and we are coming into winter.

'Those sorts of levels, even if they stay very stable and below the first peak of the virus, unless they start dropping, we are stuck with those for months and it seems to me and others that

that's not going to be sustainable in terms of what the health service can deal with.'

A group of academics said the potential for 'harmful diversion of resources and public money is vast', and warned the half-a-billion-pound project could be a 'costly failure'.

New data shows the rate of infections across England and Wales appears to be slowing down.

The slides now contain a note which says: 'Plots on slides four and five have been amended after an error was found'

The revised figures now suggest the second peak is likely to be on par with the first with the worst-case scenario at 1,010 deaths a day by December

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) said an estimated 618,700 people in England - one in 90 - had Covid-19 between October 25 and 31, up from 568,100 the week before.

The Government and its scientific advisers were lambasted on Thursday for using 'dodgy data' to justify a devastating second lockdown, with Tory MPs warning SAGE's doomsday predictions had echoes of the controversial dossier that sent Britain to war with Iraq.

It emerged a graph brandished at a press conference by Professors Doom and Gloom that claimed England could see up to 1,500 deaths a day by December had been secretly toned down 'after an error was found' with the data.

The prediction caused widespread alarm because, if true, it would dwarf the 1,000 daily deaths recorded during the peak of the first wave in April.

SAGE's forecast for hospital admissions was also quietly revised from 9,000 by early December to 6,190.

The Government faced a stern rebuke from the UK Statistics Authority this week over its use of data.