



The Telegraph

No more lockdowns – Britain will treat Covid like flu, says Chris Whitty

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© Jonathan Brady/PA Empty streets around Bank Underground station in London, during the lockdown - Jonathan Brady/PA

Lockdowns are unlikely to be needed again as Britain learns to treat coronavirus like flu, Prof Chris Whitty has said.

The chief medical officer said that up to 25,000 people die in a bad flu year without anyone noticing and that accepting some Covid deaths would be the price of keeping schools and business open and allowing people to live a "whole life".

Prof Whitty, speaking on a Royal School of Medicine webinar, said the Government would only be forced to "pull the alarm cord" if a dangerous variant arrived, against which people had no immunity and which sparked exponential growth.

"Covid is not going to go away," he said. "You've got to work out what's a rational policy to this and here I would differentiate quite a lot between a pandemic environment and what you get with seasonal flu.

"Every year, somewhere between 7,000 and 9,000 citizens die of flu, most of them very elderly, and every few years you get a bad flu year where 20,000 to 25,000 die of it. The last time we had that was three years ago and no one noticed it.

"So it is clear we are going to have to manage it, at some point, rather like we manage the flu. Here is a seasonal, very dangerous disease that kills thousands of people and society has chosen a particular way round it."

Prof Whitty said it was important to bring Covid deaths as low as possible, but warned that society would not tolerate being locked down to prevent similar numbers of deaths to those from flu.

"We want to get as close as we can [to zero] but the question is how do you balance that against other priorities?" he said. "What are people prepared to put up with? What we've demonstrated in the last year is we don't have to have flu at all if we don't want to, because the things we've done against Covid have led to virtually no influenza.

"If next year we say 'we can deal with flu, everyone lock down over the winter' I think the medical profession would not make itself popular with the general public.

"We need to work out some balance which actually keeps it at a low level, minimises deaths as best we can, but in a way that the population tolerates, through medical countermeasures like vaccines and in due course drugs, which mean you can minimise mortality while not maximising the economic and social impacts on our fellow citizens."

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Prof Whitty said although there would always be more measures that could be taken, such as shutting schools and universities or preventing relatives visiting the elderly in care homes, such restrictions prevented people from living a "whole life".

Asked by Sir Simon Wessely, professor of psychological medicine at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, whether lockdowns would be reimposed if cases rose, even in local areas, Prof Whitty said: "No, I don't think so."

However, he added: "Society will not tolerate more than a certain number of people being ill, even if they know it's going to go away come the spring, and the area where we're going to have to pull the alarm cord is if a variant of concern comes in that we can see is now back to a situation of unconstrained growth because the immunological response to it is just not there."

Boris Johnson has previously vowed that the current unlocking of restrictions is irreversible, and next week the Government will determine whether shops can reopen on April 12 as planned.

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that infections in the community are continuing to fall, dropping eight per cent in a week.

However, Mr Johnson warned last week that cases were rising in Europe and a third wave may spread to Britain from the continent. Latest data from the King's College ZOE symptom tracker app also suggests the 'R' number may now be at one, or even above in some areas. The ONS warned that cases may be rising in the East of England.

Prof Whitty said that it was impossible to prevent variants from coming into the UK, and argued that shutting the borders would be unlikely to prevent new infections.

The Government has been strongly criticised for keeping the borders open during both lockdowns, even though studies have shown that the vast majority of Britain's cases were imported from countries like Spain and Italy.

"We have to accept the idea that stopping variants coming to the UK is not a realistic starting point, but you can slow it down," he said. "Anyone who believes you can put up some border policy that stops it is misunderstanding the problem completely.

"While the 'R' is less than one, which it has been for two or three months, then new variants don't have much of a foothold. Once we start to open things up, then if a variant comes in it has the opportunity to spread and the more cases you import the quicker the starting point. What we're trying to do is slow it down."

Prof Whitty also said that it was sensible to keep an "open mind" on whether the AstraZeneca vaccine caused blood clots until it was proven otherwise.

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