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## Government 'used grossly unethical tactics to scare public into Covid compliance'

MPs launch investigation after psychologists criticise totalitarian tactics of 'deploying fear, shame and scapegoating' during pandemic

By Tony Diver, POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

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The Government's "grossly unethical" uses of its ["nudge" tactics inflated fear among the](#)

[public](#) during the Covid pandemic, psychologists have said - prompting MPs to launch an investigation into scare adverts.

A group of psychologists have written to Parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, warning that civil servants and Government scientists used frightening imagery to change public behaviour during the pandemic, in a way they say was unaccountable and unethical.

The letter's 40 professional signatories - led by Dr Gary Sidley, a retired clinical psychologist - said they opposed the use of dramatic adverts, which included slogans such as: "If you go out you can spread it, people will die."

They also condemned the use of "images of the acutely unwell in intensive care units" on billboard and television adverts, as well as the "macabre mono focus on showing the number of Covid-19 deaths without mention of mortality from other causes or the fact that, under normal circumstances, around 1,600 people die each day in the UK".



The use of 'images of the acutely unwell in intensive care units' on billboards was condemned | CREDIT: Dominic Lipinski/PA Wire

The signatories said it was “highly questionable whether a civilised society should knowingly increase the emotional discomfort of its citizens as a means of gaining their compliance”.

The letter added: “Government scientists deploying fear, shame and scapegoating to change minds is an ethically dubious practice that in some respects resembles the tactics used by totalitarian regimes such as China, where the state inflicts pain on a subset of its population in an attempt to eliminate beliefs and behaviour they perceive to be deviant.

One advert showed a close-up photo of an intensive care patient in a mask, with the caption: “Look her in the eyes and tell her you never bend the rules.”

Another said: “Look him in the eyes and tell him you always keep a safe distance”.

The letter drew attention to a government memo from March 2020, which suggested that “the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent” and called for more frightening messaging.

The Telegraph understands that Parliament’s Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will investigate the use of “nudge” tactics as part of its investigation into the Government’s activities during the pandemic. It will coincide with the second anniversary of the first lockdown.

William Wragg, the committee’s chairman, said: “I think the central issue is how ‘nudge’ sits within parliamentary democracy and ministerial accountability.

“Normally, it's quite straightforward to know where lines of accountability are between the law, parliamentarians scrutinising the law and the public following it.

“And this is a wider question of how much, in a parliamentary democracy, sits outside of that approach.”

The psychologists also warned that “scare ads” have had unintended consequences.

“Shaming and scapegoating have emboldened some people to harass those unable or unwilling to wear a face covering,” they wrote.

“More disturbingly, the inflated fear levels will have significantly contributed to the many thousands of excess non-Covid deaths that have occurred in people’s homes, the strategically-increased anxieties discouraging many from seeking help for other illnesses.”


Mr Sidley and the letter's other signatories blamed the involvement of so-called "nudge unit" - or Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) - for the tactics.

The BIT was originally based in the Cabinet Office but became a private company in 2014. It has had no involvement in the adverts and says it opposes the use of fear in campaigns.

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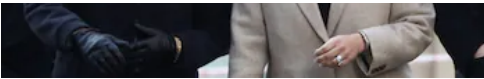
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