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## The Covid Inquiry must remember that the victims are not only the ones who died from it

It is imperative that Lady Hallett ask hard questions of the people who did this to us – so here are six questions for her to start with

**ALLISON PEARSON**

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**H**ang on, what happened to the fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse? We've done Plague, Floods and War. Famine must be drumming its hooves against the stable door. Amid all the dark madness, quite understandably, we have lost sight of problems closer to home.

A reminder came last week when terms of reference were published for the UK Covid inquiry, which is to be chaired this spring by Lady Hallett, the former Court of Appeal judge. At first glance, the remit seems reasonably broad, but I spy some worrying omissions – such as the effect of lockdown on children and young people. As Robert Halfon, chairman of the education select committee, told the Commons, for the Covid inquiry to only investigate restrictions on school attendance was “like calling a mortuary a ‘negative patients output’”.

Already, it seems clear that the Government would prefer to focus on Covid deaths and the Covid “bereaved”, and avoid painful contemplation of the lockdown victims – that is, those whose mental and physical health, livelihoods and education were damaged by actions taken by ministers, scientists, civil servants and the NHS.

It is far too easy for “the pandemic” to become a catch-all scapegoat for human error. Like those infuriating recorded messages you still get whenever you try to see a GP: “Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we are planning on stringing out working from home for as long as possible, because, well, it really suits us, actually, so please try to avoid illness or death where possible. If you must see a doctor, make yourself available in a 4.5-hour window (yes, even if you've got a job!), when a GP will eventually call you and tell you there are no appointments until April. But do call 111 instead! Alternatively, you may try the surgery again at 8am tomorrow when you can dial our number 73 times and finally be told all appointments for the day are taken. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we are experiencing high call volumes. To lose the will to live, please press 1...”

Let's be clear: the virus is not to blame for GPs failing to see their patients. (Doctors in most other countries never stopped face-to-face appointments.) The virus is not responsible for this week's devastating news that mental health services received a record 4.3 million referrals last year. The Royal College of Psychiatrists calls it “the biggest hit to mental health in generations”.

The virus is not to blame for the fact that a frantic mum I know, whose 10-year-old says he wants to die, has been told the first appointment that CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental

Health Services) can offer her son is in three years' time. That's three years, not months.

Lockdown caused, and continues to cause, all of the above. We are now living with the tragic consequences and any inquiry worth its salt must ask some hard questions of the people who did this to us. How dare they?

Writing in these pages on Monday, Matt Hancock, the former health secretary, said with his infallible cheery complacency: "I wouldn't want to portray the pandemic response as faultless, but we did all we could and constantly tried to learn lessons as we went on." It's big of Matt to admit his pandemic response was not faultless. Some might say that allowing thousands of elderly patients to be turfed out of hospital, without testing them first, and putting them back into care homes where Covid spread like a forest fire among the vulnerable elderly was a teeny bit worse than not quite perfect. Let's see what Lady Hallett thinks.

Hancock is certainly correct to say that the Left's rejoicing that Boris bungled the Covid response, doing far worse than comparable countries, is unfounded. As the latest data reveal, the UK had lower excess death rates than most other European countries, and England's death rate was very marginally lower than in Wales and Scotland, who kept draconian restrictions for longer.

Oddly, what Matt doesn't mention is that our country has ended up with the longest hospital waiting list in the world and 740,000 missed cancer referrals. So what you might call our collateral-damage death rate may soon be beyond horrifying.



Matt Hancock said: 'I'm proud of the way the team stepped up in the face of this challenge, working relentlessly to save lives. Yet I also know that every member of the team will want to learn.' | CREDIT: Matt Dunham - WPA Pool/Getty Images

I was talking to another former minister, who rolled her eyes when she recalled being tasked with trying to make sense of the crazy, Covid-compliant wedding restrictions. Apparently, these had been devised for the human population by Bleep, Booster and other on-the-spectrum nerds.

“So, why can’t the bride throw the bouquet?” demanded the minister.

Er, baffled look from junior nerd.

“Why must the father of the bride wear a mask to walk her down the aisle when he hasn’t worn a mask in the car that brought them both to the church?”

Er, because computer says no?

OK, those are trivial examples (although they sure ruined a lot of wedding photos), but they remind us of the unprecedented – at times farcical, at others tragic – level of intrusion into our private life. I’m sure all of you will have areas, be they ethical, medical or practical, that



you think Lady Hallett and the Covid inquiry should look into. Well, the inquiry is running a Terms of Reference Consultation which is [open for the public's suggestions until 7 April](#).

To get the ball rolling, here are a few of mine:

- 1 At a No 10 briefing in March 2020, Michael Gove said that the virus did not discriminate: “Everyone is at risk.” And yet it was clear Covid was a highly discriminatory virus; people over 75 were 10,000 times more likely to die from it than those under 15. Who authorised the decision to press ahead with a misinformation campaign telling the public that “all age groups are at risk”, and why?
- 2 On March 22, 2020, a paper by SPI-B (the committee giving behavioural science advice to the Government) said: “The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting, emotional messaging.” Why was it agreed to use fear as a weapon to increase compliance with the coronavirus rules when the public were already showing signs of using their common sense and staying home? What are the likely long-term mental health effects, on children in particular, of telling all age groups they should be scared of Covid?
- 3 Next slide, please! Some of the graphs shown at the No 10 briefings by Professor Sir Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance picked the lowest historic data point to contrast with the highest projected data point. Expressing data in percentage terms also heightened the sense of alarm. We need a thorough analysis of the veracity of every slide shown to the British people, please, Lady Hallett.
- 4 In the Netherlands, at the peak of the pandemic, the Dutch health system lost only 4 per cent capacity. What percentage capacity did the NHS lose?
- 5 What role did militant teaching unions play in keeping schools shut for so long? Oh, and why was Gavin Williamson, then education secretary, knighted – for services to bugging up British kids’ education?
- 6 And finally, how exactly did throwing a wedding bouquet spread Covid?

I have a lot of faith in Lady Hallett. She did an extremely good and sensitive job with the inquests into the 7/7 London bombings. Many reputations will stand or fall according to what she discovers in the coming months, and it will take strength of character to resist that official narrative. It’s not enough to conclude that “lessons have been learnt”, when the mistakes made cost so very much. All we can hope is that the inquiry doesn’t miss the smaller picture.

The victims of Covid are not only the ones who died from it.

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