

COVID-19 INQUIRY – MODULE 2

the Government in its communications before, during or after 19 July 2020 and I have not seen evidence of its proposals being adopted into policy or implemented.

9: Behavioural fatigue

- 9.1. As I explained in my Witness Questionnaire, the term "behavioural fatigue" is not a behavioural science term; that is to say it did not feature in behavioural theories and there was no measure of it. The term in relation to a pandemic appears to have been introduced into SAGE and the Government discourse as a justification for delaying lockdown, with negative consequences. For example, during a Government press briefing on 9th March 2020, reference was made to 'fatigue' in the context of imposing Covid-19 rules too soon, namely, "There is a risk that if we go too early, people will understandably get fatigued and it will be difficult to sustain this over time." SPI-B were not consulted about this statement. A link to this video/transcript is exhibited as [**SFM/15- INQ000223088**].
- 9.2. SPI-B was not asked for our views on the notion of "behavioural fatigue". Had we been, the response would have been that there was not such a concept in the behavioural science literature, not in published evidence nor in theories of behaviour nor in measurement. SPI-B never mentioned this term apart from a discussion I recall concerning its source and use. The source of the introduction of the term 'behavioural fatigue' into discussions around Covid-19 is unknown, but it certainly did not come from SPI-B. More than 600 behavioural scientists signed a petition expressing their disquiet about the use of this notion in relation to Covid-19 management. This petition is exhibited to this statement as [**SFM/16- INQ000214043**]
- 9.3. As I explained in my Witness Questionnaire, I was the lead author on a paper, '*The concept of "fatigue" in tackling Covid-19*', which was published in the BMJ in November 2020, written in response to the "behavioural fatigue" which I considered misleading and which had been ascribed, inaccurately, to SPI-B/SAGE. A copy of that article is exhibited to this witness statement as [**SFM/17- INQ000214045**]. After considering three different scientific meanings of the term 'fatigue', we concluded that at the time of the article, overall, in the UK, we had not yet seen evidence for the kind of decreasing trend in compliance with regulations that could be construed as fatigue within its scientific meanings, but that there were substantial capability, opportunity, and motivational factors that could be contributing to lower levels of adherence than are needed to prevent the spread of the virus.

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9.4. The term 'behavioural fatigue' which, in my professional opinion, had several negative consequences, undermining both policy and science, became part of the conversation around the introduction and adherence to rules:

- a) The term was used by the CMO, Professor Chris Whitty, in a press conference on 9 March 2020 as mentioned in 9.1, as a reason for not asking people to adhere to rules too early. The CMO told the press conference that: "[t]here is a risk that if we go too early, people will understandably get fatigued and it will be difficult to sustain this over time", this is [SFM/15- INQ000223088] .
- b) The term was taken up by the UK media, attributed to unnamed experts, despite there being clear evidence of people working from home without the Government advice to do so.
- c) It was taken up internationally, for example, a WHO report using that term in its title: '*Pandemic fatigue*'; '*Reinvigorating the public to prevent COVID-19*'. This report is exhibited as [SFM/18- INQ000214046]. Despite its title, the report was actually about waning motivation to adhere to protective restrictions, not 'fatigue' (which means tiredness). In science, precision of terms is important for understanding and policy implications.
- d) Despite Sir Patrick Vallance, CSA, stating on 12 March 2020 that the decision to delay was not based on behavioural science (implying that the term did not come from SPI-B), the use of the term nevertheless undermined psychology and behavioural science, as argued by SPI-B member Professor Stephen Reicher in an article in the Guardian newspaper on 24 June 2021.
- e) In my opinion it caused behavioural scientists to be blamed for the delayed first lockdown which cost many lives. . For example, in a private meeting with MPs on 16 June 2021, Matt Hancock was reported in the press as having blamed unnamed behavioural scientists for their advice about managing the pandemic, saying that they had "got it wrong". I recall that this information may have first appeared in the Sun Newspaper, but I cannot assist further as to its source.

9.5. SPI-B and SAGE minutes will demonstrate that behavioural science advice given was not to delay lockdown and did not invoke the concept of 'behavioural fatigue':

- a) The SPI-B report to SAGE dated 4 March 2020, exhibited to this statement as [SFM/19- INQ000109111] state: "Expectations of how the Government will react will be set by media reports, public health strategies in other countries. This increases the risk of public concern if interventions that are perceived to