

The UK, meanwhile, was clocking up its first known cases in January 2020: a woman who returned from Hubei province on 23 January subsequently developed fever, sore throat and dry cough. A household contact later developed symptoms, suggesting person-to-person transmission. Both were hospitalised in Newcastle, in north-east England, on 31 January as a precaution and discharged after a mild illness.

That friction, between waiting and wading in, led to a palpable tension between Patrick and Chris in the early weeks of 2020, particularly given the apparent absence of political leadership in that period. Boris Johnson, the prime minister, did not attend the first five COBR meetings on coronavirus in January and February 2020.

Chris, though, had more experience than Patrick of operating in political circles: he was in government in 2009, during the H1N1 swine flu pandemic. It was projected to lead to 65,000 deaths; in the event, there were fewer than 300. Dame Sally Davies, then England's chief medical officer, was unfairly criticised for overreacting. The UK stockpiled oseltamivir (sold as Tamiflu) and other measures at great expense.

That backlash possibly made Chris wary of the same happening this time round. He talked about the outbreak as a marathon not a sprint. In a sense, outbreaks *are* marathons, but there are times in every long-distance race when you need to go fast. That go-slow outlook pervaded much of the thinking in January and February 2020 in the UK, even though all the information that had accumulated by the end of January should have set off the loudest of sirens.



SAGE collects and analyses scientific evidence to inform, not set, government policy. The group draws, in turn, from the