

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Coronavirus (Covid-19) Outbreak

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Government and the country needed to be ready for the coronavirus situation to get worse. The public messaging so far had struck the right balance between preparing the public for what might happen and not causing unnecessary alarm.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the published figures of around 60,000 cases of the virus in China could in reality be ten times higher. There were over 1,000 people in China reported to have died from the virus; again, the actual number was likely to be higher. If the virus remained centred around Wuhan and the surrounding province of Hubei, it may be possible to prevent widespread infection in the UK. If the virus spread beyond China to its neighbours and across the world, then the UK would not be immune. Either the whole world would be affected, or the virus would be effectively restricted to China. There was no in-between scenario.

Continuing, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the expectation was that the virus would peak in Wuhan in two weeks' time. It was harder to predict what would happen more widely in China as the data was wholly unreliable. The virus had spread outside China, but there was not yet sustained transmission beyond its borders. It would be more worrying if the virus spread to those countries with weaker plans and healthcare systems, for example in Africa, where there were countries with strong commercial links to China. These countries could struggle to identify an epidemic and contain those who were infected with the virus

or provide effective treatment.

Concluding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that if the virus became widespread in the UK, there were plans in place that could slow down its spread. The virus might take between six weeks and two and a half months to reach its peak, then run at that peak for a few weeks. There was a chance there could be two peaks. It was difficult to predict the scale of an epidemic in the UK; but no one would be immune and there was no vaccine. It was possible that the virus would die out naturally as the seasons changed. If it did not, he expected that up to 50 per cent of the population would be affected with symptoms. The plans that were already in place to tackle an influenza epidemic would be needed.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that the UK was lucky to have Professor Chris Whitty as its Chief Medical Officer. He was one of the finest epidemiologists in the world. The balance struck in public communications was right and public confidence in the handling of the situation had gone up over the previous three weeks. The message was clear: the Government had a plan, informed by science. People could do something to help, namely wash their hands, catch their sneezes and self-isolate if they thought they may have the virus. Colleagues should be cautious with their communications regarding the virus; much of the information communicated by the Chief Medical Officer was not in the public domain.

THE FIRST SECRETARY OF STATE AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS said that he was just back from a tour of Australia, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore. The view in those countries was that China did not have the epidemic under control. His department had used two charter flights to evacuate 188 UK nationals, and worked with France and New Zealand to evacuate a further 25. Travel advice had not been changed to recommend against all travel to China, as this would mean commercial flights would cease, removing the principal way for UK nationals to return home. It would also not make a difference unless the same action was taken all over the world. There had been a large increase in the reported cases of the virus in Hubei province in the previous 24 hours, but this was probably a result of changes to the definition of reported cases rather than a spike in actual cases. There were nine UK nationals abroad who had been diagnosed with the virus: five in France, one in Spain and three on a cruise ship. There was good cooperation with the relevant countries.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- i) consideration should be given to suspending all flights from China into the UK;
- j) the Home Office had closed its visa processing centres in China as a precaution. Depending on how long the situation lasted, there may be an impact on Chinese students coming to UK universities that autumn as they would struggle to get visas in time; and
- k) there was already a knock-on impact on businesses dependent on components from China

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the spread of the virus would not be stopped by the suspension of flights from China. If the UK suspended flights the modelling showed that it would only slow the spread of the virus by a maximum of five days. If the whole of the EU suspended flights from China then the virus may be slowed by two to four weeks. Of the cases in the UK, only three had come from China, the rest were from Singapore or France. There was no specific treatment for the virus. However, all those in the UK with the virus had moderate or mild symptoms. There was no guarantee, but people should make a full recovery.

Responding, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that it was challenging to convince people that flights from China should continue. It was true that suspending flights would harm businesses further. Generic drugs in the UK were manufactured in China and it was important that these continued to flow into the country.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that he was grateful to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and his department for their work and in particular for getting the balance of communications right. There was potential for the virus to have a large impact on the UK's economy and it was important to be ready for that.

The Cabinet:

- took note.

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