

## SATURDAY 25 JANUARY

Signs of life from Cummings, who messaged asking if we're on top of things. 'To what extent have you investigated preparations for something terrible like Ebola or a flu pandemic? Are we ready for Ebola or a flu pandemic?' he enquired. Welcome to the party, 'Comrade! What does he think I've been doing for the past three weeks?

I patiently reply, explaining where we are up to. 'Great,' he says. This is progress.

The FCO have now advised against all travel to Hubei province. I think we need to go further, and cover far more of China, and that we'll need to withdraw Brits from Wuhan. I try to raise these points with the FCO, but I'm told in no uncertain terms that travel advice is a Foreign Office matter, and that because of the time difference their team in Wuhan are all asleep. So I called Dom Raab. He is happy to order the evacuation and will look again at the travel advice. Right now, testing is focused on travellers coming back from Wuhan. Having developed one of the first tests, there seems no urgency to expand capacity. I am constantly pushing PHE to go faster, and to use the private sector – people like Gordon Sanghera, who has been on this since Day 1.

I want everyone returning from Wuhan to be tested, but PHE says the tests are worse than useless if you don't have symptoms. This is a critical issue. If the tests we have don't work on people without symptoms, we need ones that do.

An update on the vaccine: Professor Robin Shattock from Imperial College London says he's already got two candidates that will be ready to test on animals next month. Chris Whitty is still saying it could take years. I think we can do better. I've called a meeting on Monday to go through everything. Vaccines are obviously the way out – whether just for China or for us all. A ponderous 'business as usual' approach is not an option.

## SUNDAY 26 JANUARY

The papers are full of the Wuhan evacuation, with editorials

screeching for testing of everyone who arrives. PHE is still opposed. I instinctively disagree but want to respect the scientists. Meanwhile the FCO machine is struggling to grind into second gear. This morning I discovered that officials are still working up advice on 'whether' to evacuate, not 'how' – when Raab has already made the decision!

The *Telegraph* has a story about a Chinese report of the possibility of asymptomatic transmission. This is really worrying. I asked officials for advice on this for tomorrow's meeting. PHE is adamant that a coronavirus can't be passed on, and that tests don't work on people without symptoms. These are two killer facts, so I want to push them, and leave them in no doubt that we need to expand testing.

Fellow MP Owen Paterson messaged. I shared an office with his wife Rose when I first worked in Westminster, and he always looked out for me. He put me in touch with Peter FitzGerald, boss of Randox, the biggest UK testing company, based in Northern Ireland. They reckon they can create a test in three weeks max that could produce a result in two to three hours. To develop it, they need samples of sputum containing the virus. I know PHE has some through its international work, and they should share it. I emailed FitzGerald straight away asking for more detail. The best work in medicine tends to happen through collaboration and we need to get cracking.

## MONDAY 27 JANUARY

As I was driven to the office early this morning, the *Today* programme was on the radio. I had my head down finishing off the papers in my weekend box so was only half listening. My ears pricked up as PHE came on to talk about the pandemic. Their spokesman sounded dangerously complacent, saying everything was under control, nothing much to see here, we have this covered etc. I jerked my head up out of my paperwork and gazed out over Hyde Park as I heard reassurance after reassurance. Yet I keep hearing that arrivals from China are breezing through Heathrow without even being screened. They haven't got the testing industry up and running, and there's a 50:50 chance of a major pandemic hitting Britain. What on earth are they doing?

Screening is the absolute least we should be doing. I want people arriving back from Wuhan to be quarantined, not just screened.

So by the time the meeting started at 9.45 I was in full 'action this day' mode. The Prof opened by saying that the measures by China appear to be having some effect and that the R number is likely to fall. I pushed him on my worries about asymptomatic transmission. He said that the global scientific consensus is still that this is unlikely. But is 'unlikely' unlikely enough? If you can get it, pass it on and show no symptoms, it will be impossible to manage. I really, really want answers on this one.

We discussed the vaccine briefly, but the right officials weren't in the room. So I called another meeting, tomorrow, to go through the vaccine specifically and what we can do to accelerate it. At Chris Wormald's suggestion, I also asked for the 'reasonable worst-case scenario' for this disease in the UK so we can interrogate the numbers. Only then can we figure out whether our contingency plans are up to it.

I also pushed on a travel ban from China. Sounds extreme, but other countries are now doing it. Again, I met resistance. The response was that this is an FCO responsibility. But surely the FCO need to be driven by the health advice? I asked the Prof to talk to them. He is the CMO for the whole government, so the FCO machine should listen to him.

I got an update too on getting Brits out of Wuhan. We think there are 200–300 UK citizens out there. I made clear my view is that anyone we bring back to the UK should go into quarantine – no ifs or buts. The lawyers insisted it should be voluntary. I think that's utter rubbish. If we're offering people a free flight out of Wuhan, why on earth should it be up to them? If you don't want to quarantine, don't get on the plane! I asked for further advice into how to make this happen – not whether to.

Peter FitzGerald from Randox got back to me with the technical details of what he needs to develop a test. I've told PHE to be helpful. More importantly, they need to track down everyone in the UK who has come back from Wuhan in the past fourteen days. They'll be asked

to stay at home and contact the NHS if they have any symptoms. PHE thinks there are 1,460 individuals in this category. They've set up a hub at Heathrow already, but for some reason are waiting until Wednesday to do the same at Gatwick and Manchester. Why so slow?!

Meanwhile the virus continues its relentless spread. Germany has confirmed its first case. The patient reported feeling ill on 23 January and seems to have caught it from her parents, who'd been to Wuhan and tested positive, even though they showed no symptoms. I got straight on to Jens Spahn, my opposite number in Germany. He told me the evidence on asymptomatic transmission was 'tentative' but they are worried and keeping a close eye on it.

I trust what Jens says. We're a similar age, both natural optimists and on the same part of the political spectrum – cheerful centre right. I've known him since we went out for beers to celebrate his birthday during a particularly tedious G7 meeting in Paris. Normally the host government puts these meetings on in spectacular places, showing off the best of what their country has to offer. For reasons best known to themselves, the French decided not to hold it in some splendid chateau or five-star hotel, electing to host the whole thing in their dreary Department of Health. After listening to one too many dull speeches, Jens and I did a runner and went to a little cafe round the corner. Feeling somewhat rebellious, we ordered some beers and sat in the sunshine, hiding in plain sight. He's entertaining, irreverent and we can be pretty open with each other. I'm glad he's there.

Amid all this my team is still getting calls from No. 10 and being dragged into meetings on how we're going to deliver manifesto commitments. I'm going to have to delegate. I want these commitments to happen but have to prioritise. Coronavirus is the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about when I go to bed.

## TUESDAY 28 JANUARY

A proper 'oh shit' meeting today. In the early afternoon, with the pale winter sun streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the whole team gathered in my office to go through the reasonable

## WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY

There's brass neck and then there's former Tory MP Sarah Wollaston. This pro-EU hardliner went off the reservation over Brexit, defected to the Lib Dems via the embarrassing Change UK and then spent weeks trying to portray Boris as some kind of tinpot dictator. Only last month she stood against us in the election as a Lib Dem. Now she's written to me all, 'Hi Matt, hope all is well?' as if nothing'd happened, lobbying for us to make her chair of NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence), presumably on the grounds that she's a GP and chaired the health select committee. I could not believe the cheek of it. I bounced her request off Dom, who was suitably disgusted.

'No way! PM would hit roof! She's called for most of us in No. 10 to be arrested!' he exclaimed.

'Quite. I thought extraordinary that she asked,' I replied.

PMQs today was surreal: not a single question on the virus. I stood by the Speaker's chair thinking, 'Every single question you lot are asking will be rendered completely irrelevant in a few weeks.'

After yesterday's shocking meeting, today we had a more pragmatic discussion. The Prof has helped crystallise my thinking on how we phase our response to the virus, at least in the early stages. He popped upstairs to propose four elements. First, we try to contain isolated outbreaks. Then we try to delay the spread. If containment doesn't work and the virus spreads to the general population, we move on to mitigating and slowing its effects, and throughout we research for treatments and a vaccine.

Feeling like a broken record, I pushed PHE again about asymptomatic transmission. Their latest paper says almost nothing – not even a provisional finding. I don't get why it's taking so long to get an answer on this – not just here but around the world. I called Tedros again to have another go at persuading him to declare a public health international emergency. My sense is he's terrified of upsetting Beijing. I asked him about unofficial reports from China that there was asymptomatic transmission and he played it down, blaming 'translation

issues' as if the glaring lack of information coming out of China is all some kind of perfectly innocent communication problem. Sensing I was a bit sceptical, he doubled down, claiming to be 'impressed by their transparency'. What?! The Chinese made their comments about asymptomatic transmission three days ago and the WHO still hasn't checked if they were reported correctly. Unbelievable! Doesn't anyone there speak Mandarin?

My view is that Tedros is trapped by the politics. While the US and UK are the WHO's biggest funders, we play with a straight bat. China runs various projects in his private office, so he is scared stiff of upsetting them. You can't fault the WHO's science, but the politics is awful. It's going to be a serious issue if we have a global disease and the main global health body adopts the Chinese approach to information flow. If asymptomatic transmission is happening, then the odds are that the disease is already out of control.

Confirmed cases in China are now up to nearly 10,000, plus more than 100 others in twenty-two other countries. We're testing a trickle of people here and 50:50 is looking increasingly optimistic. British Airways has suspended all flights to and from mainland China, but more than a month since this thing started, international travel is still pretty much business as usual. I am haunted by *Contagion*...

We finally held our first COBRA. The underground bunker room was packed. Ben Wallace at Defence, Dom Raab and Simon Stevens sat at the top of the table as officials typed action points and conclusions real-time onto the screens above our heads. We went through the reasonable worst-case scenario and ministers were sent away to work out what they'd have to do if that happened. We discussed the evacuation plans. The FCO is getting a kicking over the evacuation from Wuhan because British citizens aren't allowed to bring their other halves. Actually, it's the Chinese authorities who are banning their citizens from leaving, even if they're dual nationals. We want to be compassionate, but the Chinese Communist Party doesn't really do touchy-feely. The French and the Americans have hit exactly the same problem.