

Dear Chris and Jenny,

One of the advantages of no wall to wall diary this week and some time off is the luxury of thought. I think the reactions to SofS latest interview about workplaces being low risk drove me to it; how do we know if they have mainly been closed? (says Paul Hunter – who is not always right but usually thoughtful).

In the same way that we have today shone the spotlight on the disconnect between genomics science and practical policy-useful data, here is another one...

I mentioned it a couple of weeks ago when chairing the JBC Silver; but it then gets lost in the melee.

We have by now tracked and traced thousand and thousands of contacts. We should in theory know if these are home, work, school or other contacts. What I am told is that we don't then ever know if these contacts become cases. Household research studies only give a partial answer because these only track household contacts, and are much smaller in size. So we therefore only begin to know the conversion rates (contact becomes secondary case) in households and cannot shine the spotlight on other sites of transmission such as pubs, schools, buses and restaurants etc. except when these crop up as foci of outbreaks (which may indicate only a minority of their true role in non-outbreak sporadic but repeated transmission). We are told that reverse contact tracing will help fill some of these gaps; but surely ought to be a simple exercise to flag in T&T when an ex-contact is re-registered as a case? (and then to extract the relevant data). I am working with the new App developers to make it clear that is some of the granular data we very much need off the 'back end' as soon as possible.

Any views on whether I am barking up the wrong tree here; and if not how we try to drive this along as an essential rather than a luxury.

JVT

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Subject: FW: SMC Reaction V3: Matt Hancock comments on facemasks in offices [IMMEDIATE RELEASE, 2020-08-19]

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Subject: SMC Reaction V3: Matt Hancock comments on facemasks in offices [IMMEDIATE RELEASE, 2020-08-19]

Science Media Centre Rapid Reaction VERSION 3

IMMEDIATE RELEASE Wednesday 19th August 2020

Expert reaction to comments by Matt Hancock on BBC Breakfast that the UK is not considering mask use in offices as COVID transmission in the workplace is low*

***NEW COMMENT* Prof Paul Hunter, Professor in Medicine, The Norwich School of Medicine, University of East Anglia, said:**

“Following Matt Hancock’s statement, I would urge some caution. I assume that he is basing this on internal data being generated by the test track and trace agency. Whilst this data has not yet been made publicly available, I suspect that he would not say such a thing without some good evidence to back it up.

“However, given the changing situation in the UK we have to be careful not to assume that what was the case a month ago will necessarily be the case next month. If most office workers were still working at home until recently or are even still working at home, then of course office based transmission isn’t going to feature in the statistics. For any situation to play an important part in transmission, the people have actually got to be in that situation. It is a bit like saying that because there were no cases associated with churches in the UK from April to July, then churches are safe and we should encourage everyone to go to church. The fact that churches were closed for worship during that time may have had more than a little to do with the fact that there were no cases there and so this gives no real evidence for whether or not churches are safe. I know some offices have continued to operate but generally with rather fewer workers who were able self-distance.

“We do know that there have been office related outbreaks elsewhere in the world and in the UK¹. So office based transmission has been known to occur.

“The big concern with offices is not the general low-level person-to-person spread that probably is an issue in the recent past and works effectively in families, but whether super-spreaders can rapidly accelerate transmission in a large office environment. We have seen this already in work environments in the UK².

“Face coverings may have a role in reducing risk of transmission, but they are not an absolute guarantee. Other aspects of social distancing also need to be maintained.

“Clearly the UK needs to get back to work, but simply relying on data to date when many people have been working at home is not an adequate measure of risk. Employers have to undertake a proper risk assessment of their workplaces and then act on this to reduce risk to their staff and consider how to protect any particularly vulnerable employees. Otherwise, we are certainly likely to see work environments feature more highly in the future.”

1 – <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-53616559>

2 – <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/aug/13/uk-coronavirus-live-news-covid-19-latest-updates>

***NEW COMMENT* Prof James Naismith FRS FMedSci, Director of the Rosalind Franklin Institute, and Professor of Structural Biology, University of Oxford, said:**

“The Minister is quite right, the data show that currently infection overwhelmingly spreads at home. However, this reflects our current condition, with social distancing, many people working at home, masking, summer weather and restrictions on occupancy of social spaces. A mass return to work out of home will change these conditions and consequently how the virus spreads.

“Until a vaccine or universal medicine arrives, our most effective plan is to isolate infectious people – this needs rapid mass testing. Since no system is 100 %, we all have a part to play – washing our hands, wearing