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Medical chief dismisses DUP's Poots' claim virus levels higher in nationalist areas

Covid infecting all sections of society equally, McBride insists



Michael McBride

Gillian Halliday

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Northern Ireland's chief medical officer has said there is no data to support controversial comments made by a DUP Minister that levels of Covid-19 are higher in nationalist areas than unionist ones.

Dr Michael McBride said everything indicated that the virus is spreading across all sections of society equally in Northern Ireland.

"At no stage would we have publicly or privately suggested that there is a link between the transmission rates of Covid-19 and people's political affiliation or religion," he told media.

"There is no such evidence, we don't have that evidence. Our approach throughout this has been guided by the evidence. I know of no such evidence."

Agriculture Minister Edwin Poots has claimed the difference in virus transmission between nationalist and unionist areas was "around six to one"

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He linked this to alleged breaches of coronavirus rules by Sinn Fein members at the funeral of IRA veteran Bobby Storey in Belfast in June, suggesting that had set an example for supporters of the party.

"A lot of this started shortly after the Bobby Storey funeral," he told UTV.

"A lot of the problems started after that event and people in that community saw the breaking of the rules - that is why there is a difference between nationalist areas and unionist areas and the difference is around six to one."



Edwin Poots said Sinn Fein and others have tried to distort his comments (Liam McBurney/PA)

Sinn Fein's John O'Dowd subsequently called on the Lagan Valley MLA to apologise for his remarks, claiming Mr Poots had effectively accused nationalists of spreading the virus. He said the remarks had caused "huge offence".

Mr Poots' party colleague, MLA Paul Givan, came to the Minister's defence, stating the remarks were made in a "sensible manner".

Mr Givan claimed Sinn Fein members were "blinded" to the reality and insisted Mr Poots had not brought the issue of religion into the debate.

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Mr Poots later denied his remarks were sectarian, telling the Irish News they could not be because "most Sinn Fein leaders don't attend the Catholic Church on a regular basis".

The deepening divisions at the Executive comes as a further three Covid-19 linked deaths were announced on Tuesday, along with 913 new cases of the virus here.

A total of 286 patients with Covid-19 are in hospital, with 29 in intensive care.

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The Department of Health's death toll now stands at 624, although latest figures published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency said 915 Covid-19 related deaths occurred here up to October 9.

Dr McBride dismissed Mr Poots' remarks as he joined the Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Ian Young, to once again urge people to adhere to the public health messaging to ensure our health service is not overwhelmed.

Professor Young warned that the next "four weeks will be crucial" in stemming the spread of coronavirus, but stressed there were early signs the latest restrictions were beginning to have an impact.

"What we are beginning to see is a slowing of the rate of increase, which is a positive sign," he explained.

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Dr McBride added that health and social care workers will "undoubtedly" face a challenging next few weeks.

"Our health service is going to be under extraordinary pressure over the next four to six weeks, and certainly into the spring, and we can all do our bit to alleviate that pressure," he explained.

His plea came as it emerged 2,700 health workers here are currently self-isolating due to Covid-19. The Western Trust also said a small number of "red flag" cancer surgeries had been postponed.

In the Irish Republic, 1,269 more cases and 13 further deaths were reported last night.

The figures were announced as the country prepares to move to level five restrictions for six weeks, to December 1.

It could lead to pressure on the Executive here to align with the Republic. Our tightened restrictions run until November 13.

Sinn Fein president Mary Lou McDonald repeated calls for an all-island approach to tackle the pandemic.

However, Taoiseach Micheal Martin dismissed this, saying she knew more than anyone else in the Dail chamber of the "difficulties and sensitivities of trying to reach an agreement within the North, never mind on an island basis".

DUP MLA Jim Wells, who has had the party whip withdrawn, said he believed the party would resist an extension to lockdown.

"There would be huge opposition to that within the party," he said.

