

earnestly inform me that every local authority and every NHS organisation in the country has a pandemic preparedness plan 'on the shelf' ready and waiting. The question is whether these documents are worth the paper they're written on. I've asked to see a random selection.

the plan

The good news is we've got a billion items of disposable personal protective equipment (PPE) stockpiled and ready to dispatch to hospitals if required. It's stashed away at a secret location in the north-west, where it's been gathering dust – hopefully not literally – since it was put together in 2009.

At the moment the response is still very much within our remit in the Department of Health – hospital capacity, nursing numbers, any legislative changes we might need, testing and the very early work on a vaccine – but the rest of government will need to crank up in case this goes global. So far I am not getting much back – the system is preoccupied with delivering Brexit at the end of the month.

## TUESDAY 14 JANUARY

Andrew Wakefield, the 'doctor' who got struck off for his outrageous scaremongering over the MMR jab, has reared his ugly head again. Just when we may need a vaccine for a deadly new disease, he's plugging some new film called *Vaxxed II: The People's Truth*. Apparently it's being marketed on secret Facebook groups. I cannot believe that he's still in circulation, spreading his misinformation. Or that he used to date the supermodel Elle Macpherson. How did that happen?

I don't want any of his latest nonsense getting any traction, so I issued a statement about the wonders of modern vaccines and the dangers of listening to misleading tripe.

Meanwhile PHE has come up with a diagnostic test. You've got to hand it to them: China only published the genetic code three days ago, and they've already figured out how to spot it in a drop of saliva. I had a spare hour this afternoon, so I popped into Chris Whitty's office to discuss the latest developments. I noticed that he has a Union Jack flying from his balcony, which I hadn't clocked before. The Prof is a committed internationalist who has spent most of his life in



team. I think he felt a bit guilty about his huffy tone because he immediately followed up with an emollient message assuring me that they will do whatever is required to help. I don't doubt it.

Endless rumours flying round about cases in this or that part of the country. We're being contacted by jumpy new MPs every time they hear something. We're not going to investigate each time we're asked, so we just keep repeating the facts: namely, that there are no confirmed cases here.

PHE's audit of PPE came back and did not lighten my mood. The paperwork is all over the place. There's no clear record of what's in the stockpile, and some kit is past its 'best before' date. I've instructed officials to work out what we need fast, and buy in huge quantities.

#### FRIDAY 31 JANUARY

Brexit Day – and the virus is here. Nearly four years after the referendum (feels more like twenty) we are officially out of the EU. According to the Downing Street grid, today was meant to be about celebrating this historic moment, our new horizons etc. Instead it kicked off with Chris Whitty announcing the arrival of the disease. Downing Street are furious. I am daunted.

I got a call from my private secretary at half past midnight last night to tell me we had two confirmed positive cases: a Chinese student and his father, who'd flown in from Wuhan to visit him. After they reported ill on Wednesday night and then tested positive, health officials in full hazmat suits turned up on the doorstep of the flat where they were staying in York and carted them off to hospital. Our protocols worked seamlessly, and to give the patients their due, they behaved impeccably, isolating in their apartment from the moment they fell ill, along with the student's mother. Curiously, she's tested negative, showing what a lottery this virus may be.

To the dismay of some colleagues, the PM pressed ahead with a long-planned Brexit-themed Cabinet meeting in Sunderland. These symbolic displays of our (very real) commitment to voters beyond



Wow. Rishi also proposed £20 billion in outright grants and tax cuts for companies at immediate risk of collapse. Who would have thought that the Tory Party would preside over the biggest programme of state intervention in the economy since 2008? Unlike almost any other economic crisis, this hardship is directly driven by our own policies to save lives, so it's only right and fair to put policies in place to help people through.

The point is that liberal individualism is a great political philosophy – probably the most successful in the history of mankind – but no use in a pandemic, when the problem is essentially communitarian, stemming from the fact that we all catch the same disease because we're all human. Anyway, Rishi got Cabinet's full support. As Boris put it, 'We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy.'

Later a senior civil servant came over from the Cabinet Office, charged with getting agreement across government for what's going in the emergency Bill. I've worked with him on a host of projects and he's a first-rate generalist classic civil servant, but he nonetheless took some time to adjust to the notion that this new legislation needs to be drawn up and enacted right away. I was not at my most patient best, and our exchange quickly became somewhat heated as I told him in no uncertain terms that we can't delay, and that if any departments don't get their act together by Thursday, we'll have to publish the Bill anyway. There are some measures I simply won't countenance – like a bonkers proposal from the Ministry of Justice to let prisoners out, as they'd be easier to manage if they're not in prison. Yes really: they actually thought this might be a goer.

I was emphasising this point so hard that all of a sudden my chair could take the strain no longer and ripped, tipping me unceremoniously onto the floor. Humiliating as it was, it broke the ice, and the stony-faced mandarin finally cracked a smile. After that, we came to an agreement pretty swiftly.

Continuing to work through the practicalities, Steve Oldfield updated me on the huge stocks of PPE in a warehouse in the north-west:



a billion items. Just one problem – we can't get it out. It turns out that when they laid down the PPE stockpile in the 2000s, no one thought about the circumstances under which we might need it, i.e. an emergency, in which time is of the essence. It's in a huge storage unit which only has one door. Ergo, only one lorry can pull up at a time. Shame nobody looked at Amazon's warehouses for inspiration – they have dozens of lorry bays. What a classic government fail.

Lack of doors notwithstanding, we have a real moral responsibility to sort this out. It's about protecting everyone who is putting their own health at risk to look after others. I called Ben Wallace to ask if the army can help get this stuff out to hospitals, and he was immediately on board. Overnight 150 trusts had PPE shipments and I'm promised that by the end of the week all trusts will have had at least one delivery. Care homes are desperate, and I've insisted they also each get a load. It doesn't matter if they are private businesses: it's an emergency and we need to do our best to protect everyone in the country.

As instructed, Steve and his team have been buying from abroad. He told me our plodding procurement processes are a massive hindrance. The rules say they have to buy at the bottom quartile of the market, which in normal times is vital for value for money, but prices are shooting up and we are losing deals. I told Steve to throw everything at it. 'Anything out there – you buy it. Identify it and buy it. We need tiger teams across China seeking and buying the PPE we will need.' How ironic that only a few weeks ago we sent a plane load of our own PPE to... China. The right thing to do at the time, and only a tiny quantity in the grand scheme of things, but if we'd known what was coming, we might not have been as generous.

We are at least finally making significant progress on testing. David Halpern plus Will Warr, the health policy lead in No. 10, organised a crunch meeting with potential testing providers, with PHE, NHS officials and everyone else we needed in the room to make things happen. Boris opened the meeting, stressing the importance of the mission, and then passed to me to chair. I listened to the private



treat rheumatoid arthritis and lupus. I got straight onto Jim Bethell, who says we're already buying, though naturally there's a scramble. JVT is working out allocations between patient groups in a way that doesn't undermine our clinical trials, because it's too early to say whether it works.

Around the world, leaders are turning inwards. China has asked foreign diplomats to stay out of Beijing until 15 May. Trump has invoked the Defense Production Act to halt the export of masks and other PPE. It's hardly surprising: the US has confirmed 32,000 cases in one day, a new record. The breakdown of international cooperation just when we need it most is another sign of the enormity of this thing.

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) today released the first solid evidence showing that asymptomatic transmission is occurring. I've been banging on about this for weeks, but the advice I have been getting has all pointed towards asymptomatic transmission being unlikely. PHE is re-investigating. I should have pushed this much harder.

#### **SATURDAY 4 APRIL**

Carrie has Covid. She's heavily pregnant, which probably makes the symptoms feel a hundred times worse. What an awful year for her and Boris, who is now being accused by unnamed 'sources' in the media of 'stubbornly refusing to stop working'. There is growing muttering that he's jeopardising his own recovery by failing to rest. True.

Meanwhile President Trump has randomly and dangerously declared that hydroxychloroquine is an effective treatment for Covid, despite a total absence of the evidence required for such a statement. What does he know that JVT doesn't? I am despairing. What an awful, awful man.

Every day I check case numbers obsessively, hoping to see that the worm has turned. Every day I'm disappointed.

#### **SUNDAY 5 APRIL**

*A cri de cœur* from Helen Whately, who is under massive pressure over PPE shortages in care homes. 'It is still all over the place,' she said.



Apparently she is getting contradictory information from officials, who can't seem to answer any questions about supplies. 'There is only so long I can keep saying to the social care sector that we're working on it without losing all credibility,' she said miserably. I promised to do everything I can.

On the morning media round, I did my best to make Boris sound in better shape than he is.

'I've been talking to him every day, several times a day,' I said truthfully, adding that he's very much got his hand on the tiller. I admitted that he's still running a temperature but stressed that he's in good spirits.

After *Marr*, I found myself in the BBC green room with Keir Starmer, who took over as Labour leader yesterday. What odd circumstances in which to become Leader of the Opposition.

'At least Jeremy Corbyn becoming PM and destroying the country can come off my worry list,' I told him cheerfully.

'Happy to lighten your load,' he replied.

Scientists, politicians and journalists are beginning to ask more searching questions about the origins of the virus. The wet market theory is now looking less credible than what goes on behind closed doors at a virology laboratory in Wuhan. It just so happens that there's a leading coronavirus research facility in the exact same place that this nightmare began. More than a bit suspicious, no?

Assuming nobody intended to cause such a catastrophe, it strikes me as possible that Chinese scientists discovered the virus in the wild, took a sample to examine in the lab and then let it escape as a result of poor biosecurity. Though the international consensus and the government's position is that the virus originated at the Wuhan wet market, I remain sceptical. There must be a full investigation into what happened.

This evening, the Queen gave a special coronavirus address to the nation and Commonwealth. As always, Her Majesty struck exactly the right note, conjuring up Vera Lynn's wartime classic when she said that together, we will beat this thing – and meet again.