

Coronavirus

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Letters

The government's herd immunity plan is callous and dangerous

Readers respond to Boris Johnson's apparent strategy to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak

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It seems that our government has decided that the spread of coronavirus in the population to levels creating herd immunity is inevitable, and indeed desirable ([Why rely on nudge theory to fight a virus?](#), Journal, 14 March). However, on the basis of China, and indeed South Korea, where by stringent measures the spread of the virus was halted in its tracks at a relatively low level, massive population spread is not inevitable.

We have not been told why such a policy by contrast is not appropriate for the UK. Given the pitifully low level of intensive care unit facilities and trained ICU staff here, it would seem even more critical for our country that the spread of the virus is not merely managed as an epidemiological case study, but stopped before the [NHS](#) is completely overwhelmed, as it will be at the levels of infection calmly being predicted by the government and its advisers.

The approach looks dangerously like callous complacency rather than urgent emergency intervention. If carnage unfolds, we will look to the experience of other countries, and if we have a significantly higher death rate than others, our government will not be forgiven.

Stephen Smith*Glasgow*

The UK government's strategy to minimise the impact of Covid-19 "is to allow the virus to pass through the entire population so that we acquire herd immunity". Implicit in this is the acceptance of large numbers of deaths of vulnerable people, hence [Boris Johnson](#) saying that many families will lose loved ones. This sounds dangerously like what Malthus described in 1798 as "positive checks", which lead to premature death from disease, starvation and war, resulting in what is called a Malthusian catastrophe. In contrast, nearly every other government in Europe is pursuing a different strategy - one of containment. For once, the phrase "being ahead of the curve", has deep meaning.

Tom Conroy*Dublin, Ireland*

It has long been obvious that Boris Johnson exists in a moral vacuum, but to propose a public policy that tacitly accepts the potential death of thousands of people is beyond shameful and, equally so, to try to minimise its impact as the loss of loved ones before their time. Not only should we question the scientific validity of herd immunity, which the World [Health](#) Organization rejects, but also its morality. No wonder the rest of the world is looking with incredulity at the UK government's response to Covid-19.

Alan Walker*Professor of social policy, University of Sheffield*

There is a reason why doctors take the Hippocratic oath. Now when key decisions on coronavirus are made by politicians, perhaps they should take it too. If herd immunity works, it will be at the cost of avoidable deaths - of patients, health workers and doctors. If it doesn't work, we will have a social experiment that failed, at the cost of many human lives. Boris Johnson said that "many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time". He should have finished his sentence with "and many of those deaths are avoidable".

Other countries aren't doing this, for good reason. If one of my friends or family die under this policy, I will seriously look at crowdfunding a judicial review. I think we should do everything possible to change this heartless and arrogant approach.

Amanda Edwards*Velindre, Llandysul*

Tony Yates quotes Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, as explaining part of the reason for not embracing bans (on gatherings) is to encourage "herd immunity". Surely this is a misinterpretation of what herd immunity is? Before the polio vaccine was developed people got polio. They didn't get herd immunity. Herd immunity is predicated on vaccination and it is the vaccinated who constitute the herd, not those with the disease. No vaccine just means more disease, not more immunity. This seems like a dangerous misunderstanding for one in such a pivotal role to make.

Dr Andrew Platman*GP retired, Beckenham, Kent*

Your correspondents ([Show us the evidence behind Covid-19 policies](#), Journal, 14 March) are justified in their scepticism of the government's response to Covid-19; Boris Johnson and his colleagues haven't always been transparent on other matters. However, I do trust the chief medical officer (CMO) and chief scientific adviser (CSA) - expert clinician-scientists - and they appear to be leading decision-making at the moment.

The CMO and CSA are wrestling with complex, contradictory, partial and rapidly-changing data, and formulating recommendations as best they can. Of course, there's a debate to be had as to why experts in other countries are initiating more severe restrictions, and more transparency on the modelling information being used would be welcome. More proscriptive actions come with significant risks of their own. For example, closing schools will potentially remove parents employed in health and social care from the workforce at this critical time and/or expose grandparents (the most vulnerable demographic) to risk of increased viral exposure if they take on childcare responsibilities.

There is a risk that the government will start to ignore the advice of the CMO and CSA; I do not believe that these two professionals would allow their public health recommendations to be overridden for political expediency.

Dr Miles Maxwell*Hitchin, Hertfordshire*

In the last 10 years of Tory control, the NHS has lost 100,000 doctors and nurses and 17,000 beds ([Journal](#), 10 March). This has not been accidental, but deliberate, and has rendered the NHS incapable of dealing with this

virus, whatever the government claims. I'm almost 82 and feeling quite chirpy. If I eventually drop off my perch thanks to the virus and the Tories' destruction of the NHS, I intend to return and systematically haunt every guilty member of that administration on a daily basis.

Alec Murdoch

Edinburgh

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