

Coronavirus update on testing and treatments

Mr Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement on coronavirus.

The virus is spreading, both here and overseas. In the last week, over 450,000 people tested positive for coronavirus in Europe, almost double the number of cases a month ago. And here in the UK, the number of hospital admissions is now the highest it has been since mid June.

Last week, the ONS said that while the rate of increase may be falling, the number of cases is still rising. Yesterday, there were 12,594 new positive cases. The rise is more localised than first time round, with cases rising particularly sharply in the North East and North West of England, and parts of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Now, more than ever, with winter ahead, we all must remain vigilant, and get this virus under control.

Mr Speaker, I now want to turn to the operational issues in data publication, and the future plans for medicine licensing, and of course the announcement of 40 hospitals made by the Prime Minister on Friday night.

Testing

Mr Speaker, I want to take the first available opportunity to set out to the House the technical issue around case uploads, discovered by Public Health England on Friday night. This is an ongoing incident, and I come to the House straight from an operational update from my officials.

On Friday night, Public Health England identified that over the previous 8 days, 15,841 positive test results were not included in the reported daily cases. This was due to a failure in the automated transfer of files from the labs, to PHE's data systems.

I want to reassure everyone that every single person who tested positive was told that result in the normal way, in the normal time frame. They were told that they needed to self-isolate, which is of course now required by law.

However, these positive test results were not reported in the public data, and were not transferred to the contact tracing system. I want to thank colleagues who have been working since late Friday night, through the weekend, to resolve this problem. And I want to set out the steps that we have taken.

First, contact tracing of these cases began first thing Saturday.

We brought in 6,500 hours of extra contact tracing over the weekend, and I can report to the House that as of 9am, 51 per cent of the cases have now

been contacted a second time for contact tracing purposes.

I want to reassure the House that outbreak control in care homes, schools, and hospitals has not been directly affected. Because dealing with outbreaks in these settings does not primarily rely on this particular PHE system.

Second, the number of cases did not flow through to the dashboards that we use for internal and external reasons to monitor the epidemic. Over the weekend, we updated the public dashboard. This morning, the JBC presented to me their updated analysis of the epidemic, based on the new figures.

The Chief Medical Officer has analysed that our assessment of the disease, and its impact, has not substantially changed, as a result of these data.

And the JBC has confirmed that this has not impacted the basis on which decisions about local action were taken last week. Nevertheless, this is a serious issue which is being investigated fully.

I'd like to thank Public Health England and NHS Test & Trace who have worked together, at speed, to resolve this issue and I want to thank everyone for their hard work over the weekend.

Mr Speaker, this incident should never have happened but the team have acted swiftly to minimise its impact. And now it is critical that we work together to put this right, and to make sure it never happens again.

Treatments

Mr Speaker, another important area of our coronavirus battle plan is treatments.

As the House knows, the only treatment known to work against coronavirus was discovered here in the UK. And as we leave the EU, I want to use the opportunity to improve how quickly we get new drugs to patients here.

The UK is joining with Canada, the United States, Australia, Switzerland and Singapore, in Project Orbis, which will allow international regulators to work together to review and approve the next generation of cancer treatments faster.

This means pharmaceutical companies can submit treatments to be reviewed by several countries at the same time so we can co-operate with the best medical regulators in the world. And make approvals quicker so we can get patients the fastest possible access to new drugs.

This is an exciting development, and we will join this scheme fully on 1 January 2021 after the end of the transition period.

Because we will stop at nothing to bring faster access to live-saving treatments on the NHS.

New hospitals

Mr Speaker, we are investing in our hospitals too.

And 2 weeks ago I announced to the House that we are investing an extra £150 million to expand capacity in urgent and emergency care so hospitals have the space to continue treating patients safely in the pandemic.

On Friday, I am delighted that my Right Honourable friend the Prime Minister set out the 40 hospitals that will be built by 2030, as part of a package worth £3.7 billion. With 8 further new schemes invited to bid for future funding, also to be built by 2030, including mental health facilities.

This is the biggest hospital building programme in a generation.

And this investment comes on top of the record extra £33.9 billion a year that the government will be providing to the NHS by 2023 to 2024 that we passed into law right at the start of this Parliament.

Mr Speaker, these 40 new hospitals across England will support our mission to level up our NHS.

So even more people have top-class healthcare services in their local area.

And so we can protect the NHS long into the future.

Local action

Finally Mr Speaker, it is critical that our rules are clear on a local level, so that the public can be certain of what they need to do to suppress this virus.

And I will update the House in due course on what action the government is taking so we can have a more consistent approaches to levels of local action, working with our colleagues in local government.

For now, it is essential that people follow the guidance in their local area and if they need to check the rules, that they check their local authority website.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, history shows us that the battle against a pandemic is never quick and it is never easy.

It requires making major sacrifices and difficult choices. And I know that this has been a tough year for so many, and that we are asking people to persevere, as winter draws in.

Because the only safe path is to suppress the virus, protecting the economy, education and the NHS, until a vaccine can make us safe.

And I commend this statement to the House.