

Coronavirus

This blog raises some questions and seeks your thoughts. Contrary to the assertions of a couple of my recent correspondents I do not have a view of what is the right course of action for the UK authorities to take, and this piece does not offer a solution to the problems posed.

Let's begin with the way the government is proposing to handle this. Chris Whitty, England's Chief Medical Officer is an epidemiologist who has studied contagious diseases. He will lead for the government in keeping us informed of how many cases there are, what the current state of knowledge is concerning the virus and its transmission, and progress with diagnosis, testing and a possible vaccination in due course. He will also give advice on how government and private sector should respond to contain and defeat the virus.

Most of us who are not medical experts will listen carefully to him. I have also taken advice from two doctors so far on this issue, and have talked to my local NHS General Hospital about their response.

To yesterday Chris Whitty has reported 19 cases in the UK, all thought to have been caught outside the UK. The latest four come from Italy, Tenerife and Iran, showing the spread of the disease worldwide.

The Secretary of State will announce governmental decisions based on the advice, and will be responsible for informing Parliament, passing any necessary legislation and ensuring the NHS has the resources needed for its role. The Chief Executives of the NHS in England and the devolved Administrations will be responsible for planning for contingencies, providing sufficient capacity for patients, and balancing resources should numbers escalate substantially.

Whilst the politicians will lean heavily on the professional advice, they ultimately will have to make crucial and difficult judgements. As Chris Whitty has said recently, a policy like closing all schools or cancelling lots of sporting events and entertainments might be needed, but they do not yet know they would be a good idea. As the CMO said "We do not know yet. We need to find that out. ... How likely are they to work? What's the evidence? What's the cost?"

The problem for both the experts and the politicians is that they do not know enough about the virus. Will higher temperatures kill it off as they do many flu strains? How long does it rest in someone without symptoms, and how catching is it from that person? Is it true it little affects young people? Can we believe the Chinese numbers implying they are gradually getting in control of it in Wuhan at the centre of its genesis? Is the death rate the same or lower than conventional flu, or is it worse?

Current advice is to self isolate and to ring 111. It is also to wash hands thoroughly and frequently as a likely route for infection. Are there

additional measures which could usefully be taken to try to prevent further transmission?

How far should a free society go in banning flights from affected locations or requiring people who may have been in contact to be isolated for 14 days?

Current policy also hinges on tracking contacts of anyone confirmed as having the virus. What happens when someone with it has been on the tube or attended a football match?

All this shows that the response is a matter of judgement. Currently governments and experts seem to be relying to a considerable degree on the World Health Organisation, who are spreading information and helping co-ordinate work on this infection. I wish them all well in researching it more thoroughly so we do know exactly how it is transmitted, and can produce a vaccination to ward it off.

Meanwhile the government will also need to weigh the practical consequences of any advice or regulations they bring in. Closing all schools means many parents having to stay at home to look after children. Imposing more movement restrictions and flight cancellations has an economic cost. If safety clearly requires it then it should be done, but Chris Whitty's questions about efficacy and cost need answering before any such decision. There is also the issue of fairness related to efficacy. Is banning a play or sporting event fair if we are not banning conferences or demonstrations? Parliament itself could be a good way to spread the virus but presumably we wish to keep it meeting.