

# Health Secretary opinion piece in the Mail on Sunday

Moments after the Prime Minister called to ask me to become Health and Social Care Secretary last Saturday night, I spoke to my teenage daughter in the kitchen.

'You won't have much to sort out then, dad,' she said sarcastically.

When I came back to Westminster on Sunday morning, I found the biggest in-tray I've had at any department – and I've run 5.

I've spent the last year working with Harvard University on how governments can learn from this pandemic and be better prepared for future challenges, now I'm the one faced with so many of those tough choices.

I feel both the heavy responsibility and urgency that comes with this job.

My first video call on vaccine progress had to be at the same time as the England-Germany match. It was all going well until JVT (Jonathan Van-Tam, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England) suddenly took off his headphones because he didn't want to hear the score before he watched a recording of the match.

It was an honour to start the meeting by thanking the team who have delivered the rollout, including everyone in the NHS, the Vaccines Taskforce and the officials in my department.

Amid the endless policy memos and reams of data, I see 2 immediate challenges. The first is how we restore our freedoms and learn to live with (coronavirus) COVID-19. The second is to tackle the NHS backlog – something that we know is going to get far worse before it gets better.

We are on track for 19 July and we have to be honest with people about the fact that we cannot eliminate COVID-19.

We also need to be clear that cases are going to rise significantly. I know many people will be cautious about the easing of restrictions – that's completely understandable. But no date we choose will ever come without risk, so we have to take a broad and balanced view. We are going to have to learn to accept the existence of COVID-19 and find ways to cope with it – just as we already do with flu.

The economic arguments for opening up are well known, but for me, the health arguments are equally compelling. The pandemic has hit some groups disproportionately hard. Rules that we have had to put in place have caused a shocking rise in domestic violence and a terrible impact on so many people's mental health. All the progress we have made is thanks to the sacrifices of the British people – and our phenomenal vaccine programme. The jabs are working. The latest data from the Office for National Statistics shows that 8

in 10 UK adults have the COVID-19 antibodies that help the body fight the disease. The implications of this are huge.

Tragically, the last time we had 28,000 new cases of COVID-19 in a day, we saw about 500 people die each day. On Friday, we had almost 28,000 cases a day, but 24 times fewer people lost their lives.

There will always be the possibility that we have to deal with dangerous new variants that evade the vaccine but I encourage everyone to get their jabs now if they haven't already done so. It is the single biggest contribution you can make to this national effort.

We have many other crucial health challenges that we need to confront. We protected the NHS to make sure it was there for everyone who needed care. The steps we took saved countless lives but also led to the build-up of a vast 'elective' backlog – checks, appointments and treatments for all the less urgent, but often just as important, health issues.

Because of the pandemic, we estimate that about 7 million fewer people than normal came forward for healthcare. Even if only some of that demand returns, we will see enormous pressure on the NHS.

To help meet this demand, build a better NHS and bust the backlog, we need to build on the changes we've all embraced through the pandemic, such as using NHS 111 to direct patients to the most appropriate setting to receive care, expanding the use of our pharmacies and encouraging more people to use the NHS app.

We have to keep doing all of that, and more.

Of course, if you are feeling unwell, you need to come forward. The NHS is always there for you – and now in many different ways.

We're putting record levels of funding into the NHS. In March, we committed a further £7 billion of funding – including £1 billion to begin tackling the elective backlog and about £500 million for mental health services and investment in staff.

And we're bringing so many more talented colleagues into the workforce. We have record numbers employed in the NHS, with more than 58,300 more staff in hospital and community health services since March last year, including over 5,600 more doctors and 10,800 nurses.

We're also embracing technology to help staff spend less time on paperwork and more on patients.

It's time to build on the spirit of innovation we've all embraced and use it for the other challenges we face: from finally fixing social care and putting it on a sustainable footing, to tackling the health inequalities that the pandemic has brought to the fore.

I'm determined we get that right.

There's a lot of work ahead, but if we hold on to the spirit that has seen us through these difficult days, we will have a country that is not just freer, but healthier, too.