

Mr Javid's arguments for greater Lockdown

Yesterday the Secretary of State for Health took to the pages of the Daily Telegraph to explain why he wants a more cautious policy. The crucial passages said

“We face a tsunami of infections in the coming days and weeks. Omicron spreads at a pace we have never seen before and has been doubling about every two or three days. Yesterday saw more than 90,000 new cases reported across the UK....The ultimate risk is that hospitalizations overwhelm the NHS”

Of course an easily transmitted disease will show very fast growth on first arrival on a small base. You would also expect the percentage rate of increase to slow as the number of people infected by it rises. It cannot go on doubling or growing at all were every one to get it, and well before it reaches that level you would expect a slower growth rate before subsiding again. It doesn't take many days to cover the whole population if it did go on doubling in less than two days.

But note the confusion in this statement between total covid cases including all variants, and numbers of Omicron cases. In recent days there has not been anything like a doubling of covid cases as a whole. Some of the fast growth in Omicron has been offset by declines in other versions of the disease. The last four days produced 87,565 (16 Dec), 92,503 (17 Dec) and 89,074 (18 Dec) and 82,886 (19 Dec).

We now know that the modellers have not been modelling better outcomes, distorting the task for decision takers of weighing risks and probabilities of bad outcomes. When the scientists rightly warn that they cannot yet know how fast this will spread or how serious an illness it may give people until they have more data it is very important to provide good as well as bad scenarios to inform a sensible discussion about how much risk to run.

Hospitalizations were running at a recent peak of 9.345 on the seven day average on 6 November. This had fallen to 7549 by 16 December. This compares with an all time covid peak of 38.389 in Jan 2021.

Many people are fed up with alarmist scientific forecasts which turn out to greatly exaggerate the numbers who will suffer a serious illness. The data used needs to be accurate, relevant and presented fairly.

I have delayed the economic piece until tomorrow as this CV 19 issue is even more topical.