

The timing of these severe measures

The health policy says close more things down and stop people getting about unless it is essential to the NHS, basic utilities and the food supply that they do so. Keep them closed until the disease is tamed enough. The economic policy says close less down, re-open as quickly as possible, try to limit the economic damage.

Judging when to lift the new restrictions becomes the crucial decision. Do it too soon and the disease presumably leaps up again. Leave it too long and big swathes of the UK private sector will be excessively debt ridden or bankrupt.

So it would be good to have a bit more explanation from the epidemiologists how accurate their models are and when they judge it might be safe to reverse these measures. Learning from overseas countries ahead of us on the upwards curve of this disease is a good idea, but we need to understand the different bases of their figures and the big imperfections in them.

Some countries concentrate on testing after death. This can give a high death rate, as many people who get the disease and recover are never tested and counted, whilst many people who may die of something else can have death attributed to the virus they were carrying. There may also be false positives in the tests.

Some countries concentrate on testing those who declare symptoms, who mainly go on to recover. This may well produce a lower death rate, though the figures may still be way out as many people with symptoms or with the mild version of the disease may never report or seek a test. Some countries test key workers and patients at risk, yet another different set of figures.

It would be good to see test results based on a proper sample of the population to know how many already have it, compared to full testing on all those who have died from symptoms like the virus. It is still a medical judgement if the virus killed them. It will also be better when the new test to find those who have recovered from it and now have antibodies against it is available.

In the meantime government faces a difficult dilemma. Which of the many reports of various death rates and rates of new infection does it believe or does it think we are most likely to follow? At what point would it be safe to reverse these measures? When will we have in place sufficient tests to make the numbers more reliable than many of those from around the world using selective testing? People's lives depend on these numbers. Millions of people's livelihoods also depend on them, so they better be available soon and they better be reasonably accurate. The only justification for the economic misery is that the measures save lives. Giving businesses a better idea of how long it may take would also assist their plans and their financings.