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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE

Response to the 20th October Press Conference by Health Secretary Sajid Javid. We need a Winter Plan now

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain & Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser, UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

At his press conference of 20th October 2021, the Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, noted the rise in infections, hospitalisations and deaths due to Covid. He stressed that the pandemic ‘is not over’ and that cases could rise still further, up to 100,000 a day. He pledged that the Government would keep a close watch on the figures and “stay vigilant preparing for all eventualities”. But he ruled out any extra measures at the present time. Instead, the Health Secretary stressed the need for people to get vaccinated and to ‘play their part’ by acting cautiously –particularly wearing masks in crowded spaces.

We endorse the call for people to get vaccinated as a key element in the strategy to control Covid. We also endorse the call for people to act cautiously and responsibly in order to protect themselves and others from infection. We agree that both are necessary elements in a Covid strategy for the coming months. However we depart from the position of the Health Secretary in three crucial respects.

First, we regard the current situation of some 250,000 infections, 5,000 hospitalisations and 700 deaths per week in England as sufficiently serious to warrant immediate action. Moreover we endorse the position of Sir Patrick Vallance, echoed in the recent joint report by two House of Commons committees, that in order to avoid the pandemic escalating further and requiring more stringent action to bring it back under control (as happened in the autumn of 2020) it is better to ‘go hard and go early’.

Second, while vaccines are an essential centrepiece of the Covid strategy they are insufficient on their own to deal with the currently dominant delta variant. The advantage they give us is to make it possible to control the pandemic with far less stringent measures than in 2020. If we do act early, a plan which combines (a) enhanced roll-out of vaccines with (b) measures that foreground protection and support (e.g. ensuring public spaces are safe through meeting ventilation standards, giving people the right to work from home) and only involve mild restrictions (e.g. wearing masks in crowded indoor spaces) will be sufficient.

Third, while people should indeed ‘play their part’, this is not simply a matter of motivation, but requires Government to provide the support necessary for such actions to be possible. Notably, there is a continuing need for clear and consistent information about how people can keep themselves safe and for resources to allow them to do so – say by staying off work if sick (with sick pay), self-isolating if testing positive for Covid and updated information on the symptoms of Covid.

In sum, we urgently need to implement a ‘vaccine plus’ winter plan to control Covid based on providing protections and support to the public. Such a plan was published by Independent SAGE on September 17th 2021 and is available at <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Winter-Plan-final.pdf>

It is critical to stress that this plan is not a call for ‘lockdown’. To the contrary, the failure to implement sensible and proportionate protections in the short term makes it more likely that we will need greater restrictions in the long term. In other words, Sajid Javid’s decision to do nothing is the real lockdown plan. What we offer is an anti-lockdown alternative.

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