

Is This The First Glimmer Of Hope In The UK Fight Against Coronavirus?



PA Chief Scientific Adviser Patrick Vallance during a media briefing in Downing Street, London, on coronavirus.

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Game for a graph?

It was carefully caveated, it was measured, it was eminently sensible. But for the

very first time since these Downing Street press conferences started, chief scientist **Sir Patrick Vallance** seemed to have a real note of hope in his voice as he detailed the latest Covid-19 statistics.

Vallance's graph, which showed the number of hospital admissions for those with the virus, was of course not good news, in the conventional sense. The NHS is dealing with roughly a thousand more people every day who present with symptoms of this awful disease.

Some 9,000 people have now been hospitalized with coronavirus and that is undoubtedly "a very difficult number to deal with", as he was at pains to stress. With survivors graphically describing how they felt like they were 'drowning', it's a terrifying ordeal, the spectre of death never far away.

Yet Vallance also pointed out the 1,000-a-day number was "not an acceleration" and in fact was "a bit more stable than it has been". Moreover, he added: "I expect the number of people coming every day to be about that", though it may go up 'a little bit'.

Stabilizing the rate of increase in infections would be invaluable in buying the time the NHS needs to increase its critical care beds to deal with those growing numbers. If, and it is naturally a big 'if' right now, the number of hospital admissions remains stable then there could be grounds for cautious optimism.

Vallance himself said that the figures "may suggest that we're already beginning to see some effect". Given that we have only been in 'lockdown' for a week, and given the lag in response times, was he suggesting that even pre-lockdown measures (advice about handwashing and staying 6ft away from others) are having an impact? And will the tougher 'stay at home' edicts since last Monday really now flatten that curve?

Vallance may have dampened some optimism when he said (of the hospital numbers) that "we expect this to get worse over the next few weeks because there's a lag phase". If the absolute number gets worse that's one thing, but if there is an acceleration then that's altogether more worrying.

There's good reason to be cautious. The number of 'cases' who have tested positive so far is not exactly meaningless but without widespread testing, it is always going to be a massive underestimate of the total number of real cases.

And on deaths recorded, those are only for deaths in hospital. We will find out tomorrow from the Office for National Statistics how many deaths have been ‘at home’ rather than in hospital. As with opinion polls, what matters is not a few possible outliers but the overall trend over a week or weeks. But still, the fact that the number of deaths was 260 on Saturday, 209 on Sunday and 180 today, may again spark hope in some.

Another aspect of the press conference that would have been welcome to many was **Dominic Raab**’s urging the police to use ‘common sense’ in their own reaction to the lockdown. Amid reports of one force trying to stop people from buying chocolate Easter eggs, that was a reminder that the coronavirus curve can only be suppressed with public support.

Today, **Boris Johnson** distanced himself from Margaret Thatcher’s infamous ‘no such thing as society’ image. He is probably also keen to avoid that dreadful **John Major** line that led many to see him as a heartless robot on the topic of unemployment and inflation: “If it isn’t hurting, it isn’t working”.

Even without any ‘acceleration’, coronavirus is hurting many. We’ll find out in the next two weeks if the Johnson-Vallance strategy is working. And if today’s first ember of hope can glow a bit brighter.

Quote Of The Day

“One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society.”

Boris Johnson

Monday Cheat Sheet

Foreign secretary **Dominic Raab** announced a new £75m fund to charter flights to repatriate Britons from “priority countries” overseas.

The UK death toll rose to 1,408, based on those who had died in hospitals on 5pm on Sunday.

The number of former NHS staff who have returned to help has reached 20,000, **Boris Johnson** revealed in an online video.

Home abortions in England, Scotland and Wales are to be made easier during the coronavirus outbreak, the Department of Health has confirmed.

Dominic Cummings, the PM's chief adviser, is self-isolating at home after suffering coronavirus symptoms.

Tory MP **Bob Stewart** has been accused of fuelling xenophobia after a Facebook post in which he called coronavirus a "foul Chinese illness".

The Hungarian Parliament passed a bill to give prime minister **Viktor Orbán** sweeping new powers without any time limit, including the suspension of all elections.

What I'm Reading

Damned If They Do, Damned If They Don't - Prospect

Is AOC Distancing Herself From Bernie? - Politico

Wuhan Residents Doubt Death Toll - Radio Free Asia

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