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"COMMENT

Lockdown proponents assumed the worst when they had no evidence

A review last week concluded that lockdowns 'must never be repeated' as they 'serve no useful purpose'



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Latest UK deaths:98 -35%
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Lockdown roadmap
Key dates

The "sunk cost fallacy" is a well-known source of distortion in human decision-making. A decision is made which has destructive implications. The limited benefits and immense collateral damage gradually become apparent.

It is next to impossible for those involved in the decision to change their minds. No one wants to admit that it might all have been for nothing, even if that is the truth. They have invested too much in the decision to reverse out of the *cui-de-sac*. So they press on, more to avoid blame than to serve the public interest. This is what has happened to governments across Europe and to the dug-in body of specialists who advise them. Their recipe is simple if lockdowns haven't worked, there is nothing wrong with the concept. We just need more of them.

What we really need is a fresh look at the evidence by people who are not committed to their own past positions. This is what **the Health Advisory and Recovery Team (HART)**, a group of more than 40 highly qualified scientists, psychologists, statisticians and health practitioners have provided in an "Overview of the Evidence" published last week. It is addressed to non-specialists, but is scrupulously referenced to specialist research. It will not change the minds of ministers or their advisers. But it should provoke thought among the rest of us. We cannot contribute to the science, but we can at least understand it. Those who are unwilling to do even that much have no moral right to demand coercive measures against their fellow citizens.

The HART overview concludes that lockdowns "must never be repeated". They "serve no useful purpose and cause catastrophic societal and economic harms". It calls for a return to the pandemic plans prepared over a decade for just this sort of event by the UK and other governments and endorsed by the WHO. They were based on two principles. Avoid coercion and don't go for one size-fits-all measures like lockdowns when the risks affect different groups differently. They recommended balanced public health guidance, no border closures and targeted action to assist those who are most vulnerable. These principles were abruptly jettisoned a year ago. They were replaced by an untried experiment, which there was neither time nor research to consider properly.

Not everything that HART says is convincing. But three core points in this study have never been answered by the proponents of lockdowns.

First, international comparisons are now available which show no correlation between the severity of a lockdown and the level of infections or deaths. Sweden, whose conditions are broadly comparable to ours, has fared better, with no lockdown, no school closures and only minimal legal restrictions. Comparable US states like North Dakota (lockdown) and South Dakota (no lockdown) show no significant difference in outcomes.

Secondly, the collateral costs of lockdowns are staggeringly high but governments have obstinately refused to confront them.

Our own government's studies suggest that the long-term death toll will be about 220,000, about half of which will be due to factors ranging from undiagnosed cancer to increased poverty, which are attributable to the lockdown rather than to Covid. Even that takes no account of the rapid rise in mental illness and dementia, itself a big killer. Looking at the non-health effects, we have so far suffered a 10 per cent fall in GDP whereas the equivalent figure for Sweden is just 2.6 per cent. The consequences will be with us for decades.

Thirdly, the burden of the lockdown has fallen mainly on those least at risk of serious illness or death. The extreme example is the closure of schools, which has had exceptionally serious effects on the current mental health and future prospects of the young. Yet not a single previously healthy child has died of Covid. The evidence of significant transmission of Covid by children is exceptionally thin.

We have been addled by the so-called precautionary principle, which holds that if we have no evidence of something, we should assume the worst. This marks the extreme point of our risk-averse world. The alternative view is that you must have good reasons backed by evidence if you are going to stop people satisfying the basic human need for social contact, destroy their businesses and jobs and wreck their children's lives. If you don't know, don't do it.

Lord Sumption sat on the UK's Supreme Court between 2012-18.