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Speech

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 December 2020

Speech by Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock at the Downing Street coronavirus briefing.

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Department of Health and Social Care (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care>) and The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/matthew-hancock>)

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Good afternoon and welcome to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing.

I'm joined by Dr Jenny Harries, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, and Dr Susan Hopkins, the Chief Medical Advisor to Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace.

We all know that 2020 has been a hard year.

And it is ending in this festive period, which is going to be very different.

After all the efforts that we've gone through to control this virus, and in many parts of the country, this virus is under control.

Just as we've got a tiering system in place that was able to control this virus, we've discovered a new, more contagious virus, a variant which is spreading at a dangerous rate.

And I know that the vast majority of people watching today and across the country understand what we need to do together to get through this.

So today we're announcing further action within the tiering system and also some further progress on vaccines and on testing.

And I just wanted to say this before I set out the details of what we're going to have to put in place: I know this action has consequences.

And I know how difficult it is.

But I also know that it is right to take the action that is necessary to control this virus.

Across the country, cases have risen 57% in the last week

The average daily COVID hospital admissions are 1,909 a day – that's the highest figure since mid-April.

There are 18,943 people in hospital right now, that's almost as many as at the peak.

And yesterday, 691 deaths from coronavirus were reported. That's 691 people who have died just before Christmas. And our hearts go out to their families and loved ones as with all those that have died from this horrible disease.

I know the pain this causes.

So against this backdrop of rising infections, rising hospitalisations and rising number of people dying from coronavirus, it is absolutely vital that we act.

We simply cannot have the kind of Christmas that we all yearn for.

Of course, it's the social contact that makes Christmas so special. But it is that social contact that the virus thrives on, and that's how the virus has spread from one person to another.

So it's important that we all minimise our social contact as much as is possible this Christmas, and that will help protect ourselves, our loved ones and the whole country.

We've got to keep our resolve. We've got to keep going through this.

And there are 4 areas of our response that I want to update you on today very specifically.

Local action

The first are those tiering decisions that I've just mentioned.

We know that the 3-tiered system worked to control the old variant, and is working now in large parts of the country, especially in Northern England.

But, we also know that Tier 3 is not enough to control the new variant.

That is not a hypothesis, it is a fact, and we've seen it on the ground.

We have seen case rates rise in some of places close to where the current Tier 4 restrictions are, in places like East Anglia, where we've also detected a significant number of the new variant as we've seen case rates rise sharply.

It is therefore necessary to put more of the East and South East of England into Tier 4.

We are also taking action in parts of the South West, where there are some early signs of the new variant, and where cases are rising.

Even though case rates in some of these areas are not as high as in some areas badly affected, in London for instance and in Kent, the direction is clear, and in many cases is quite stark.

The doubling times are short.

And we have learnt that when it's a matter of when, not if we take action.

It is better to act sooner.

So, from one minute past midnight on Boxing Day, Sussex, Oxfordshire, Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, those parts of Essex not yet in Tier 4, Waverley in Surrey, and Hampshire, including Portsmouth and Southampton, but with the exception of the New Forest, will be escalated to Tier 4.

Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset, including the North Somerset Council area, Swindon, the Isle of Wight, New Forest and Northamptonshire, as well as Cheshire and Warrington, will be escalated to Tier 3.

And I'm afraid Cornwall and Herefordshire have seen sharply rising rates and need to be escalated to Tier 2.

This is not news that anybody wants to deliver.

And I am truly sorry for the disruption that it causes.

But I think people know how important it is that we take decisions like this to keep people safe and to protect the NHS.

South Africa

The second piece of news I want to tell you about is developments on another new strain of this virus.

Of course, the fight against this virus is a global effort.

And we are constantly vigilant and looking around the world.

As part of our surveillance, and thanks to the impressive genomic capability of the South Africans, we have detected 2 cases of another new variant of coronavirus here in the UK.

Both are contacts of cases who have travelled from South Africa over the past few weeks.

The Chief Scientific Advisor and Chief Medical Officer and others met their South African counterparts over the last day.

We are incredibly grateful to the South African Government for the rigour of their science, and the openness and the transparency with which they have rightly acted, as we did when we discovered the new variant here.

This new variant is highly concerning, because it is yet more transmissible and it appeared to have mutated further than the new variant that has been discovered here.

We have taken the following action.

First, we are quarantining cases, and close contacts of cases, found here in the UK.

Second, we are placing immediate restrictions on travel from South Africa.

Finally, and most importantly, anyone in the UK who has been in South Africa in the past fortnight, and anyone who has been in close contact with anyone who has been in South Africa in the last fortnight, must quarantine immediately.

By quarantine, I mean they must restrict all contact with any other person whatsoever.

We will be changing the law to give this legal effect imminently.

These measures are temporary, while we investigate this further new strain, which is currently being analysed at Porton Down.

And I want to thank everyone involved for the seriousness with which I know they will take these instructions.

Testing

I'd like to now move onto some more positive developments.

The third thing I wanted to talk about was an update on testing.

As you know, we continue rapidly to expand testing capacity here in the UK.

We are expanding community testing yet further in areas where the rate of infection is highest

So we can identify people, and especially to identify the around 1 in 3 people, who carry the virus without displaying any symptoms at all.

116 local areas have now signed up for this community testing, and we are in discussion with more.

These rapid turnaround tests are proving to be extremely effective at finding cases where we otherwise wouldn't.

And I am today publishing an assessment of the Liverpool community testing project, which shows how effective this can be.

I would urge anyone who has the opportunity to take part to protect their local area.

And at the same time we are boosting rapid testing in care homes, with a further £149 million to support that effort.

So all those who work in care homes in England will receive 2 rapid tests a week, in addition to their weekly PCR test.

Vaccines

Finally, amid all this difficulty, the great hope for 2021 is of course the vaccine.

The vaccine is our route out of all this.

And, however tough this Christmas and this winter is going to be, we know that the transforming force of science is helping find a way through.

I am delighted to be able to announce that the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, developed here in the UK, has submitted its full data package to the MHRA for approval.

This is the next step towards a decision on the deployment of the vaccine, which is already being manufactured including here in the UK.

We are, of course, continuing to deploy the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, which is being delivered now from over 500 sites all across the UK, and we are adding more all of the time and we are accelerating the rollout.

I am also delighted to be able to announce that we have begun vaccination in care homes.

We know that people who live in care homes are amongst those most vulnerable to this disease, and I'm delighted that we're able to do this. It is another enormous logistical challenge, and I am very grateful to colleagues in the NHS and social care sector, who have worked so hard together to make this happen.

This afternoon, it gives me great joy to tell you that the Chelsea Pensioners will be vaccinated, along with care home residents right across the country.

I think we all need a bit of good news.

And the reality is this vaccine programme is the we are going to get this.

Because every time someone is vaccinated, our country becomes a little bit safer, they become a little bit safer and we get a little bit closer to the life that we all want to get back to.

Achievements this year

As I sincerely hope this is my last press conference before Christmas.

I want to take a moment firstly to thank you, and everyone watching, for the sacrifices you've made.

And I want to thank my whole team, who have done so much, including those here, including Susan and Jenny, but including the huge team in the NHS, in the Department and right across the board.

As a country, we have been faced with the most enormous challenges, and it has been very tough.

But I especially want to thank those who help this country to become the first in the world to roll out a clinically approved vaccine.

I want to thank all those that have helped us build a bigger capacity genomic testing than anywhere else in the world – and of course the biggest testing capacity in Europe.

I want to thank our scientist who discovered the first proven treatment for coronavirus.

And I want to thank everybody working in the NHS and in social care for the work that they've done this year, and also for the work that's going to carry on this winter.

And especially to colleagues are going to work over Christmas, which of course is so important in the NHS and in social care.

Look, I know how hard 2020 has been for everybody.

And after delivering some really difficult news, if I may I want to end on a reflection about where we are as a country.

This Christmas, and the start of 2021, is going to be tough.

The new variant makes everything much harder, because it spreads so much faster.

But we mustn't give up now. We know that we can control this virus, we know that we can get through this together.

We're going to get through it by suppressing the virus, until a vaccine can make us safe, and that has been our strategy and that's what we must do.

And I know that we can do this. We've seen so much sacrifice.

We're not going to give up now, especially after so much sacrifice.

I know that some of these decisions are tough.

But I believe that everybody making the right decisions, and I believe that everybody will do what is needed to keep themselves and others safe, especially this Christmas.

And I know from the bottom of my heart that there are brighter skies ahead.

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