

Emergency financial support for those self isolating wi...

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The UK government began to talk seriously about coronavirus quarantine measures yesterday. I understand all the public health reasons for this. They are real, valid and wholly appropriate.

And now here's the problem: what happens to the quarantined person's financial well being?

We know that the average UK household has almost no savings.

And we can be fairly sure that many employers will not be willing to bear the cost of this exercise and so will expect their employee to do so. We talk quite often about those forced into bankruptcy by medical issues in the USA. But if this rapidly becomes commonplace (and it might) the chance that this will become a real issue here is high.

Then expect the biggest threat to public health to be debt. People faced with the challenge of debt will not self-isolate: they'll take the risk of going to work instead. And that way this virus will spread.

But that's only the first concern. What too about those on universal credit? Once coronavirus becomes commonplace the argument that anyone on such benefits is unlikely to have been to an infected area will cease to be relevant: everyone will be at risk from the virus. And yet those subject to this draconian regime have strict demands made of them. They have to prove their availability for work. They will not be able to do so. And they have to attend appointments or be sanctioned. How is that going to work? Unless the rules are relaxed it very simply won't work.

If the government is serious about this virus the biggest issue for the budget on 11 March is the package of measures to be put in place to support those who should be quarantined to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. This will include changes to benefit rules to ensure no one is quarantined for self-isolating. And it will include emergency funding, and enhanced statutory sick pay, even though people will not be ill, for those who have to self-quarantine and could otherwise not afford to do so.

And no one should argue about the cost: every alternative is much worse. And we can afford it.

The question is, will we? Or would we rather the virus spread instead?

Hat tip: Thanks to Stephen Gold for the conversation that gave rise to this post.