

There is a choice on coronavirus: we can save people or...

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I was talked through the choices that this government is making on the epidemiology of coronavirus by someone who has some insight into the subject yesterday. Let's call them a doctor, for the sake of convenience.

They drew my attention to a tweet by Richard Horton, who is editor of The Lancet, which is the UK's premier medical journal. He pointed out that the government is not following scientific advice on coronavirus. Scientific advice is to do what Italy is doing and create maximum social isolation at present. This will have the benefit of significantly slowing the spread of this epidemic.

What the government is refusing to consider is social isolation at present. Their choice considerably speeds the spread of this epidemic.

What was explained to me is that in both cases the epidemic will spread, and there may be just as many people catch it in either case. But, the impact is very different.

If there is no social isolation and then the virus spreads very quickly, very large numbers of people are ill, all at once, the NHS is overwhelmed, doctors and nurses are stressed to their limits and also become extremely vulnerable to the virus, and the number of deaths among medics rises rapidly, but, crucially as far as this government is concerned, the economic impact is fairly short-term and those who die are mainly amongst the elderly population, where it can be said that they had 'an underlying medical condition' because that is true for almost everyone above 75 or so.

On the other hand, if there is social isolation the epidemic will still spread, but at a much slower rate. The number of people who can have hospital treatment will, proportionately, rise because that number depends not just on how many are ill, but also on how many beds that there are, and if the period of treatment is extended then the number of available beds will, inevitably, increase. In that case the number of deaths from coronavirus will, without a shadow of a doubt, fall. So too, incidentally, will the number of medical staff who die from the virus fall as well. But, and again crucially for this government, the economic impact of this will last a lot longer.

To be blunt, the social epidemiology of this is quite simple: there is a trade-off between how quickly we allow the virus to spread, and how many people die and what the economic impact of the epidemic is. We can go for saving people, or we can go for saving the economy, but we cannot go for both.

What you need to know is that the government is choosing the economy.