

Daily Mail article

We didn't mean to scare you: Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance defend their '4,000 deaths a day' lockdown dossier and admit three-tier system WAS working - but not quickly enough to stop NHS running out of space by November 20

- Chief scientific and medical officers were hauled before MPs to defend SAGE's doomsday forecast today
- Sir Patrick said he 'regrets' frightening people with the 4,000 deaths a day figure used to justify lockdown
- Experts also admitted localised, three-tiered lockdown approach starting to take effect but not quick enough

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PUBLISHED: 08:06, 3 November 2020 | UPDATED: 09:47, 4 November 2020

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AT A GLANCE: HOW VALLANCE AND WHITTY DEFENDED THE LOCKDOWN SATURDAY'S GLOOMY SLIDES

The pair admitted what one MP called the 'avalanche of data' they presented in Saturday's briefing may have been too much to handle for the public.

Sir Patrick said: 'I would always like to get things simpler than they were and clearer than they were... clearly some of those slides were quite complicated.'

Commenting on one spreadsheet that showed how some hospitals are already seeing more patients than they did in the spring, Professor Whitty admitted it 'wasn't an ideal slide'.

But Sir Patrick defended the use of the now-infamous graph that showed a possible 4,000 deaths per day by December said it was scientifically valid and was not 'discredited' despite recent days' backlash.

'These are scenarios that are put together on assumptions,' he said, 'Reasonable worst case scenario is something you don't want to happen but could reasonably happen if things went in a certain direction'.

TIER THREE WAS WORKING - JUST NOT FAST ENOUGH

Professor Chris Whitty said he believed the local lockdown measures were working but that the outbreak was too large for them to control alone.

Professor Whitty said: 'I am confident Tier Two has had an effect and that Tier Three has had a bigger effect.

'The communities in the North and Midlands in particular... have responded remarkably to this. And because of that, I am confident the rates are substantially lower than they would've been if this had not happened.

'But the early indications we have at the present is that this has not achieved getting the R below one - it has brought it much closer to one - but it is still doubling over a longer period of time.'

CHANCE OF LOCKDOWN ENDING ON DECEMBER 2

Whitty said the aim of the lockdown is to ensure that there is a 'realistic possibility' that after December 2 England will be able to move onto a 'different state of play'.

He suggested that when the circuit breaker ends the country will move into a middle ground, likely with tougher restrictions than are in place now, but not as strict as the ones that will precede them for the next month.

SECOND WAVE WOULD BE WORSE WITHOUT TOUGH ACTION

The scientists rammed home their warning that, without tougher action than the slow-moving local tier system, the second wave will become worse than the first one.

They said they had been discussing this prospect in meetings with Government officials 'virtually every day' for the last month.

'I think all of us would say that the rates will probably be lower than that top peak but I think reaching the peak that we reached in April strikes me as an entirely realistic situation,' Professor Whitty said.

LOCKDOWN IS A DIFFICULT DECISION 'BETWEEN BAD CHOICES' – BUT NOTHING TO DO WITH SCIENTISTS

Professor Whitty and Sir Patrick repeatedly distanced themselves from the Government's decision-making process and said what action is actually taken is out of their hands.

They have no role in assessing economic consequences, they said, and could provide only scientific advice and help ministers to interpret data.

'These are very difficult decisions, we have no illusions,' Professor Whitty said.

'None of us are under any illusions. We're choosing between bad choices – none of us should shy away from that.'

Sir Patrick Vallance today admitted he has 'regrets' over frightening people with a doomsday dossier that forecasted as many as 4,000 Covid-19 deaths a day over winter and was used to justify a second national lockdown.

Number 10's top scientific adviser made the comments today alongside Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, after the pair were hauled before MPs to defend SAGE's modelling that also predicted hospitals would be overrun with virus patients by the end of this month. During the grilling by members of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Labour MP Graham Stringer asked Sir Patrick if

he believed he had frightened people with the bleak deaths data presented during Saturday night's press briefing.

The Chief Scientific Adviser said: 'I hope not and that's certainly not the aim... I think I positioned that as a scenario from a couple of weeks ago, based on an assumption to try and get a new reasonable worst-case scenario. And if that didn't come across then I regret that.'

Defending the dossier, he added: 'Those figures were ones done by major academic groups based on those assumptions and, in the spirit of trying to make sure that things are shared and open, they are the things that we have seen [in the data so far], and it's important and I think people see that.'

Professor Whitty conceded that the 4,000 daily deaths prediction was unlikely to come true because the modelling was a worst-case scenario based on a situation where no extra measures were brought in. He told MPs: 'All of us would say that rates will probably be lower than that top peak [of 4,000]'. Professor Whitty added that a figure of around 1,000 deaths a day was 'entirely realistic', without tougher action.

But the experts defended the science behind the gloomy forecast and said it was realistic to expect levels seen in April would be surpassed at the peak of a second wave, unless there was a lockdown.

They also admitted the localised, three-tier lockdown approach - only introduced on October 14 - was starting to drive down the R rate and slow the spread of infections, particularly in northern hotspots which had been subjected to 'Tier Three' restrictions.

But Professor Whitty claimed the measures were not working fast enough to counteract a mid-September surge in infections which has triggered a wave of hospitalisations that modellers believe will breach national hospital capacity by November 20.

The Chief Medical Officer said: 'It is difficult to be absolutely confident about how far their effect [the tiered system] has gone. I am confident Tier Two has had an effect and that Tier Three has had a bigger effect. I am confident of that.'

'The communities in the North and Midlands in particular, obviously London too has went into a Tier Two and some parts of eastern England too, have responded remarkably to this. And because of that, I am confident the rates are substantially lower than they would've been if this had not happened.'

'But the early indications we have at the present is that this has not achieved getting the R below one - it has brought it much closer to one - but it is still doubling over a longer period of time.'

Professor Whitty also raised hopes that families will be able to spend Christmas together, saying there was a 'realistic possibility' of lockdown being eased after December 2. The Government has refused to fully commit to the end date in case the intervention does not have the effect it hopes and case rates remain high. But the chief medical officer said there was a good chance England will have moved into a 'different state of play'.

It comes amid fears England may have jumped the gun with a second national lockdown after top scientists claimed the R rate has already dropped to the crucial level of one and that Covid-19 cases are actually 'flatlining'.

King's College London academics, who have been tracking the size of the coronavirus outbreak since the summer, argued infections were now 'plateauing' and there was a 'slight fall' in new cases across the UK last week.

Professor Tim Spector, the lead scientist behind the KCL study, revealed the latest R rate estimate on Twitter today, hailing it as 'good news'. He has already questioned the need for a second national lockdown because the virus is 'running out of steam'.

SAGE — the Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies — estimated last week the UK's R rate is between 1.1 and 1.3, meaning it had dropped for two weeks in a row.

But the group, which has advised Number 10 throughout the pandemic, claimed cases were still growing 'rapidly across the country'.

Sir Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty have admitted England's three-tiered lockdown system was working before the Government pressed the nuclear button on a second national shutdown

Top scientists at King's College London claimed today the R rate has already dropped to the crucial level of one in England

King's' academics, who have been tracking the size of the coronavirus outbreak since the summer, argued infections were now 'plateauing' and there was a 'slight fall' in new cases across the UK last week. Pictured: The team's graphs show a levelling off in cases in both England and across the UK in the last week

A similar trend has been spotted in Wales, where King's College London think the R may still be as high as 1.1

Scotland - which has already been under a tougher 'circuit-break' lockdown for weeks has seen cases plummet more quickly than the other home nations

Britain yesterday recorded its lowest number of daily Covid infections for a fortnight on the same day Boris Johnson desperately tried to convince Tory MPs to back a draconian second lockdown. Department of Health figures showed 18,950 people tested positive for the disease, which was down 9.3 per cent in a week and the lowest since Monday, October 19 (18,804)

Boris Johnson begs Tories not to rebel in crunch COVID lockdown vote TOMORROW as he faces demands to release estimates of economic hit

Boris Johnson has appealed for Tories to back his coronavirus lockdown ahead of a crunch vote tomorrow - as he faces demands to release estimates of the economic hit.

The PM told his Cabinet this morning that the draconian month-long restrictions in England were essential to avoid 'fatalities running in the thousands'.

He said the R rate was currently 'only just above one', but acting to reduce it would give more space to deploy mass testing, new treatments and make progress on a vaccine. 'I see light ahead,' he insisted.

However, Mr Johnson is up against a growing backlash with many MPs questioning the scientific basis for the squeeze.

Critics have condemned the use of a chart suggesting daily deaths could rise to 4,000 by December, saying it is out of date and has since been withdrawn by the modellers themselves.

Meanwhile, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick conceded that although analysis of the economic consequences has been produced, it does not amount to an impact assessment. He said there is 'no specific document' putting it all together.

The measures - which mean non-essential retail, bars and restaurants will be shut from Thursday until December 2 and households will be banned from mixing indoors - are set to be approved by the Commons as Labour is supporting them.

But it will be hugely damaging for Mr Johnson if he has to rely on Keir Starmer's votes to get the lockdown through.

There were signs this morning that the scale of the mutiny could be smaller than initially feared by ministers, with some rebels suggesting only 15-20 could end up voting against.

However, many are waiting for the publication of the legal regulations on the lockdown, and the full scientific evidence supporting the move.

The premier desperately tried to sooth anger on his backbenches yesterday by giving a firm commitment that the curbs will expire on December 2.

'Whatever happens these restrictions end on December 2,' he told the Commons.

'I think there is the prospect of a much brighter future ahead if we can make a success of these national measures and open up again in December, to give people the chance of some shopping and economic activity in the weeks leading up to Christmas and beyond.'

In other developments to the UK's coronavirus crisis today:

- Boris Johnson faces demands to release estimates of economic hit from COVID lockdown as ministers admit no 'specific document' has been produced - amid scramble to head off Tory revolt before crunch vote TOMORROW;
- Michael Gove was forced to admit he got the new lockdown rules wrong after suggesting golf and singles tennis could still be allowed under the incoming grassroots sports ban;

- Coronavirus accounted for one in every 10 deaths in England in mid-October up from one in 15 a week earlier, official figures showed;
- NHS hospitals in England appear quieter than usual for this time of year, leaked documents suggested, even though they are treating more than 9,000 patients with coronavirus;
- Every resident of Liverpool will be offered a coronavirus test as the first major step for Operation Moonshot – the scheme that the Government hopes will help it get on top of the crisis by the spring;
- The Scottish Tory leader warned that Boris Johnson is fuelling support for independence and must 'reflect' on his performance during the pandemic;
- Protests of more than two people will be banned during the month-long lockdown set to start on Thursday, according to Whitehall sources;
- Up to 10,000 people have booked holidays in a day ahead of the second national lockdown, which will see borders slammed shut from tomorrow night.

Meanwhile, there appeared to be friction between Sir Patrick and Professor Whitty when the pair were pressed on SAGE's 4,000 deaths a day prediction at the Commons committee today.

The gloomy forecast was shocking because it suggested four times as many daily deaths this time round compared to the peak in April.

It was shown to the public at Saturday night's press conference to justify the lockdown - but the model it is based on has low confidence intervals because it looks five weeks into the future.

Sir Patrick told the Science and Technology Committee: 'As you look for longer term projections, the numbers are bound to be wrong in one direction or another, I mean they're almost bound to be wrong in one direction or another.'

He said with projections two weeks into the future 'you can have some degree of confidence', but beyond six weeks 'you start to have uncertainty and of course that's when you have to rely on data'.

Professor Whitty, appearing to distance himself from the model, said had personally 'never used' projections that looked further than six weeks ahead when advising ministers.

Former health secretary Jeremy Hunt told him: 'You haven't used it with any minister but you were prepared to jointly present it to the public at a very, very important press conference on Saturday afternoon on a day when the Prime Minister made a complete about-turn in his policy.'

'And so, it wasn't important enough to present to ministers, I'm surprised you thought it was important enough to present to the public.'

Sir Patrick then conceded he had presented the graph to the Prime Minister prior to the conference. The pair were asked by Tory MP Aaron Bell whether the 'avalanche of data' presented on Saturday was 'an appropriate way' to make their case to the nation.

Cambridge team changes their estimate AGAIN and say Covid-19 deaths could top 700 by November 19 on current trends.

The Cambridge University team whose modelling is being fed into SAGE to steer the Government through the Covid-19 crisis has lowered its estimates.

Researchers at the MRC Biostatistics Unit COVID-19 Working Group predict there will be between 380 and 710 daily deaths by November 14. By comparison, the group said late last month there would be around 2,400 by the same date, in modelling which heavily influenced the decision for a second national lockdown.

For comparison, there were 1,000 daily deaths during the darkest days of the crisis in April. In the weeks leading up to the first peak, there were virtually no checks and balances on Covid-19 as leaders knew very little about the new disease.

Yet Cambridge's now-notorious model forecast 4,000 deaths by this December, despite the three-tiered lockdown system being in place and the majority of Brits complying with social distancing and mask-wearing guidelines.

It comes after separate researchers claimed the R rate has started to fall slightly in hotspot areas.

But Professor James Naismith, director of the Rosalind Franklin Institute, University of Oxford, said: 'It may be possible that the virus has plateaued, but this is not what nowcasting shows.'

Sir Patrick told the committee: 'I would always like to get things simpler than they were and clearer than they were. I mean, you know, that would always be an aim and clearly some of those slides were quite complicated, and it is a very complicated thing.'

Professor Whitty added: 'Well this committee keeps on telling us to publish more data and publish more data, and then when we publish more data you say you publish too much data. We do our best. And we accept that there is no perfection in this.'

While the 4,000 deaths a day was unlikely to come to fruition, the scientists rammed home their warning that, without tougher action than the slow-moving local tier system, the second wave will become worse than the first one.

They said they had been discussing this prospect in meetings with Government officials 'virtually every day' for the last month.

'I think all of us would say that the rates will probably be lower than that top peak but I think reaching the peak that we reached in April strikes me as an entirely realistic situation,' Professor Whitty said.

When quizzed about the damaging effect the second lockdown could have on the economy, the pair repeatedly distanced themselves from the Government's decision-making process and said what action is actually taken is out of their hands.

They have no role in assessing economic consequences, they said, and could provide only scientific advice and help ministers to interpret data.

'These are very difficult decisions, we have no illusions,' Professor Whitty said. None of us are under any illusions. We're choosing between bad choices – none of us should shy away from that.'

On the back of Sir Patrick and Professor Whitty's grilling today, the Department of Health published the tranche of data-sets behind Saturday's slides. They include infection, hospital admission and death statistics behind four main models by the Cambridge University, Imperial College London, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the University of Warwick.

Number 10 - and SAGE - have been accused of cherry-picking studies to justify lockdown rules and not being transparent enough with the public. Boris Johnson today promised there are 'better days before us' in the pandemic. The Prime Minister told Cabinet ministers the R number was 'only just above 1' and the lockdown would bring it back below threshold. He said 'we don't want to be doing things to repress liberty, we don't want to do anything to damage our economy' and said 'we would see fatalities running in the thousands if nothing was done'.

Earlier today, Oxford University's Professor Carl Heneghan claimed infections, hospital admissions and 'in effect' deaths were already flatlining before Saturday's announcement, raising more questions about the justification for a second lockdown.

And he slammed the graphs the Government's top scientific and medical adviser used to justify England's second lockdown in the gloomy TV briefing announcing the lockdown Saturday night, insisting they were misleading with one 'proven to be incorrect'. The one which suggested 4,000 deaths per day by December, was 'mathematically incorrect' and should not have been used, he claimed.

Sir Patrick Vallance and Professor Chris Whitty have come under fire for gloomy slides they presented in the press conference at the weekend, and will be grilled by MPs on Parliament's science committee this afternoon to justify the evidence for another national lockdown.

Meanwhile, Britain yesterday recorded its lowest number of daily Covid infections for a fortnight on the same day Boris Johnson desperately tried to convince Tory MPs to back a draconian second lockdown.

Department of Health figures showed 18,950 people tested positive for the disease, which was down 9.3 per cent in a week and the lowest since Monday, October 19 (18,804). The UK also saw another 136 coronavirus deaths — a rise of 33.3 per cent on the 102 lab-confirmed fatalities posted last week.

Top scientists said all signs now seemed to indicate the three-tier lockdown scheme was starting to work but had not been given enough time to be reflected in the data. It will pile pressure on Boris Johnson to pause the national shutdown on Thursday, which is set to last until December 2 but could be extended if the crisis is not controlled.

Number 10 was lambasted for being too slow to go into lockdown during the first wave in spring - Britain was one of the last countries in Europe to implement the draconian measures - which is thought to be partly behind the UK having the highest death toll on the continent. There is a suspicion that Downing Street decided to lock down as soon as possible over winter

to avoid making the same mistakes, and coming under the same scrutiny, as it did in spring.

Intensive care could be overwhelmed by December without action.

This slide presented on live TV on Saturday shows a projection of deaths hitting 4,000 per day by the end of December (blue line) but experts say they are 'concerned' about the decision to include this because it is based on old data that has since been updated

The 4,000 deaths per day scenario was based on the assumption that there would be 1,000 per day by the start of November. Real numbers of people dying are significantly lower, with an average 182 per day in England and 162 confirmed yesterday for the whole UK