

New Variant of Coronavirus Brings Surge of Incidence Rates in UK

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Received:  March 25, 2022

Published:  March 31, 2022

Short Communication

The United Kingdom was locked down by government ban for most time of 2020 winter to decrease the infection rates of COVID-19 which outbreak firstly in Wuhan, China from December 2019. England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, each of the countries lifted restrictions of their own subsequently. Previously the strategy of lockdown had appeared to be effective. Areas with high incidence rates had been witnessed sharp drop of cases. These areas include Northwest England and Yorkshire. Unfortunately, these cases are not universal. Incidence rates increased again in some parts of England on December 2nd, 2020, since the restrictions lowered to Tier-3 level. These parts include Kent, Greater London and other parts of southwest England. UK had recently approved two vaccines to vaccinate as many vulnerable and elderly people as possible. A new variant of coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 had recently been detected in England and the infection rates were estimated to be 70% higher than any of the previous forms. As early as September 2020 this new variant was only one in four diagnoses whilst raised to two third in December 2020 in London. Boris Johnson, British Prime Minister had to declare a new Tier-4 restriction order in order to control the pandemic situation. This new level of restrictions include closure of all non-essential shops and gyms, people are asked to stay home wherever possible as well. Hotels were closed in Tier-3 restrictions already.

Until late December 2020, however, in many other parts of the country, the proportion of infection cases caused by the new variant of SARS-CoV-2 was much lower. In Liverpool and Manchester, there were only 1/20 cases caused by new variant. England had lowered its restriction level until December 29th when the diagnose number reached a new height. Tier 4 restriction meant closure of all hospitality venues including restaurants, hotels, hostels, and bars. However, the situation continued to worsen all around UK whilst southeast and south as the worst. Suspect commentators have challenged this move and suggested a nation-wide lockdown to Tier-4 level. The rest parts of UK are already in such lockdowns.

Such commentators include Prof. Andrew Hayward who is a member of the UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) from University College London. He is positive with a nation-wide Tier-4 lockdown. Areas which are not yet in Tier-4 lockdown is going to witness rapid increase of cases until the death number forces to.

The UK government had been made decision that school should reopen right after the New Year. However, the government has reconsidered the situation and decided that only the primary and secondary school children who are in important exam years need to return immediately. Due to worsen of situation, the government had to made sudden change of decision that schools should keep closed. The reopen was supposed to be on January 4th, 2021. Some people call for closure of all primary schools for another two weeks. Despite of that, Boris Johnson said only the primary schools in the areas affected most by new variant should keep closed on a Sunday television interview (January 3rd, 2021) made by BBC. He claims that schools are safe but further closure is not off the table. Kier Starmer, leader of the opposite political power, said otherwise the virus was out of control and further school closure was due. Starmer was one of those who called for national lockdown. Andrew Hayward insists the lockdown of schools could be the key to stop the case increasing. Tier 4 lockdown may still not enough to reduce R number to below 1, albeit slower. Followed by the latest claim from Prime Minister, Prof. Andrew claims that although schools have been provided with guidance and financial support, it will be still challenging to implement mass classrooms and other contacts of positive cases. The uptake and impact of school mass testing programs is highly uncertain, as is the extent to which the new strain will increase transmission in schools and from school children to the wider community."

The UK Health Agency Public Health England publishes report that the new variant is no more dangerous in terms of mortality than the previous strain on December 29th, 2020. The country is

fighting the new variant whilst two types of vaccines have been approved: the Pfizer-BioNTech and Oxford Astra Zeneca Vaccines. The Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine, especially, has raised the hope to control the coronavirus plague by April 2021. Pfizer vaccine has a very harsh requirement on storage. The convenience of Oxford vaccine means it will reach multiple venues far easier. Oxford vaccine is expected to be in application from January 2021 onward across UK. UK medical experts prefer to inoculate people with just one feasible vaccine. PM Johnson claims the public must redouble its efforts to control the coronavirus. He is also confident with the future of UK situation.

The new variant in addition made the vaccination harder to achieve. Prof. Andrew Hayward is concerned that just as what had been happened in the first pandemic wave, homeless will inevitably

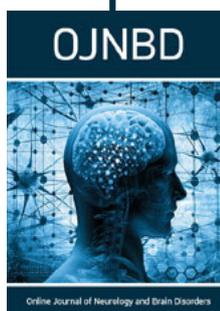
exposed to harsh winter and mortality will be undoubtable increasing. As early as March 2020, the authority helped the agencies to provide shelters for people who live in streets. Homeless people are much more vulnerable to new variants. This new variant is extremely lethal to those who are not well equipped. During Christmas, the charity organization Crisis at Christmas hosted a large number of homeless people whilst they will have to return to streets in January. UK is still among the worst affected countries by coronavirus. By the end of 2020, over 2 million people are infected whilst 70000 deaths. The new variant brought a breaking record of over 50000 new cases a day. On December 30th, 2020, a breaking record of 1000 deaths was reported. The hope lies on the new Oxford vaccine developed by Astra Zeneca and a large number of vulnerable people will receive injection in the coming weeks.



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DOI: [10.32474/OJNBD.2022.06.000234](https://doi.org/10.32474/OJNBD.2022.06.000234)



Online Journal of Neurology and Brain Disorders

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