

The UK government's pandemic response was often not 'guided by the science.' Yet now scientists are under fire

October 4 2022, by Christian Yates



Credit: Cryptographer/Shutterstock

The [UK COVID-19 Inquiry](#), an independent inquiry set up to examine the country's response to and the impact of the COVID pandemic, has officially begun.

Along with issues including [pandemic preparedness](#) and the [health care system](#), one part of the [inquiry](#), the second module, will examine

political decision-making.

The inquiry recently started [soliciting evidence](#) for this module, which will scrutinize decisions the U.K. [government](#) made during the early stages of the pandemic, up to March 2020. Eventually the inquiry will examine the decisions made by those in power up to February 2022.

Right from the beginning of the pandemic, the U.K. government loudly trumpeted the mantra that its decisions were "[guided by the science](#)." Not only did this add an air of authority to government decisions, it also provided a convenient scapegoat for the consequences of any decisions which ministers might later seek to disown.

[Dominic Cummings](#), former chief adviser to Boris Johnson, told the Health and Social Care Committee and Science and Technology Committee joint inquiry in 2021: "I certainly believe that the secretary of state, Matt Hancock, used Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty as shields for himself—yes. He used the whole 'We are following the science' as a way so that he could always say, 'Well, if things go wrong, we will blame the scientists and it is not my fault.' I saw him discuss that with the prime minister. "

More recently, we've seen Conservative leadership candidate Rishi Sunak argue that scientists were given [too much power](#) in pandemic decision-making. This is part of an ongoing narrative that seeks to shift the blame away from the government by depicting it as beholden to all-powerful scientists.

'Advisers advise, ministers decide'

Despite their claim of being "guided by the science," even the most cursory glance at the government's decision-making reveals that this was often not the case. It is well documented that the government frequently

[ignored scientific advice](#) in favor of populist policies which would eventually and inevitably backfire on them.

For example, in September 2020, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) recommended [a circuit breaker lockdown](#) to curb a significant resurgence of COVID infections. Instead, the government waited until early November before [implementing a lockdown](#).

High levels of cases inevitably led to more opportunities for the virus to replicate and mutate. After emerging in the autumn, in December 2020 the highly transmissible alpha variant [rose to dominance in the U.K.](#) (and eventually around the world), causing another steep rise in cases.

Again, scientists warned that acting early would be better than acting late. But [Johnson was insistent](#) that he would "save Christmas." Ultimately [Christmas plans were canceled](#) for millions at the last minute.

It has been estimated that delays in implementing England's winter lockdown led to [thousands of avoidable deaths](#). Far from the government's touted approach of being guided by the science, experts' advice was frequently [not heeded](#). Margaret Thatcher's well-known aphorism "advisers advise, ministers decide" held true even in this unprecedented time of crisis.

Scientists under fire

The *BMJ* recently commissioned a [series of peer-reviewed articles](#) providing evidence for the COVID inquiry. The articles' brief was to investigate successes and failures in the UK's pandemic response, including whether politicians made the best use of the scientific advice and evidence that was presented to them.

Some of these articles are explicitly critical of the government's

approach to managing the COVID pandemic. As [a co-author](#) of [two articles](#) in the series, my colleagues and I have [repeatedly been labeled "hardline"](#) experts in national newspapers.

Disagreement and debate over government policy aren't in themselves a problem. But it is worrying that national newspapers seem to have taken to impugning the integrity of experts and peer-reviewed science that has been published in a well-respected academic journal. These pieces run the risk of a chilling effect, intimidating those who are critical of the government's response into silence.

Indeed, the experience of having your name and picture splashed in [a national newspaper](#) is an unnerving one. And the inevitable increase in unpleasant comments and tweets that follow these sorts of articles make the prospect of speaking out again in the future less appealing.

But as the inquiry picks up pace, it's vital that scientists continue to share and discuss the evidence on the impact of [pandemic](#) policy. We must highlight the instances when the government disregarded [scientific advice](#), so that we might learn from the mistakes that were made and attempt to ensure we do not make those same missteps again.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The UK government's pandemic response was often not 'guided by the science.' Yet now scientists are under fire (2022, October 4) retrieved 28 December 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-10-uk-pandemic-response-science-scientists.html>

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