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4th December 2020

Dear colleagues,

We wanted to write you about winter, vaccines and research.

Winter is always a challenging time for the NHS and wider health and social care service. This year will be especially hard due to COVID-19. Doctors and other health professionals throughout the system have responded magnificently throughout 2020 to this epidemic. Although the very welcome news about vaccines means that we can look forward to 2021 with greater optimism, vaccine deployment will have only a marginal impact in reducing numbers coming into the health service with COVID over the next three months. The actions and self-discipline of the whole population during lockdowns and other restrictions have helped reduce the peak and in most parts of the four nations hospital numbers are likely to fall over the next few weeks, but not everywhere. The social mixing which occurs around Christmas may well put additional pressure on hospitals and general practice in the New Year and we need to be ready for that. Many of you will be working exceptionally hard to manage COVID on top of other medical problems and have been doing so for a long time. We think it likely that by spring the effects of vaccination will begin to be felt in reducing COVID admissions, attendances and deaths significantly but there are many weeks before we get to that stage. We must support one another as a profession as we go to the next, hard months.

Deploying vaccines safely, rapidly and in a sequence which is most likely to reduce mortality and morbidity is going to be a very considerable logistical exercise for all of us. JCVI has recommended that health and social care workers are a high priority once the most vulnerable who are at highest risk of dying have been vaccinated. This is to provide some additional protection against nosocomial spread to the vulnerable. We do not however yet have firm data on the effects of these vaccines on transmission. It is going to be essential that people continue to maintain current PPE and other measures to reduce transmission even after vaccination as we accumulate that data. All healthcare workers would agree that the principal aim of the initial vaccination programme should be to protect the most vulnerable and those at highest risk of mortality.

Medical science is the engine that will bring down the impact of COVID. Colleagues across the entire health system have been remarkable in their contributions to researching this new disease. Drug trials, vaccine trials, testing new diagnostics, clinical studies and observational data have all been essential. We do not expect COVID to disappear even once full vaccination has occurred although it will be substantially less important as a cause of mortality and morbidity. It is therefore absolutely essential that we use the next months to learn as much as we can as we expect COVID to be less common in the future. This will allow us to have the best chance of a strong evidence base for managing it over the coming years. We would therefore strongly encourage colleagues to continue to recruit to or participate in drug trials such as RECOVERY, vaccine trials, and observational studies such as SIREN. We will all be very grateful for the results this will lead to in future years.

Once again we want to thank you for all your work. We are full of admiration for what all of you have done and continue to do.



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