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AIMING FOR “ZERO COVID”

To achieve “zero covid” we need to include the controlled, careful acquisition of population (herd) immunity

Raj S Bhopal *emeritus professor of public health*

Torjesen asks whether the UK should aim for zero covid.¹ Of course it should, but how? My suggested strategy includes herd immunity, which I rename population immunity given the antipathy to the word herd, evoking animals.²

On 7 April 2020 Martin McKee wrote to the covid-19 global researchers email group “seeking sensible thoughts about coming out of lockdown.” I responded with an eight point plan, the last point being that in the absence of a vaccine we should allow young people under 30, particularly women, to get the infection voluntarily, preferably in controlled circumstances. This kind of approach has been conceptualised and modelled by others.³⁻⁵ McKee replied that it was good to think out of the box. But this is already happening in unplanned and haphazard ways.⁶ Letting the pandemic unfold uncontrolled is not public health strategy.²

I suggest population immunity as part of a comprehensive response.² I estimate that about 40-50% population immunity would be sufficient to suppress an infection with a reproduction number of about 1 or slightly more, which requires continuing, reasonable control measures. Others consider this proportion to be much lower.⁷ Allowing infection in people at low risk is justifiable if we make it safer for them than allowing it to occur uncontrolled.²

Covid-19 is currently rarely fatal in children and young people, less so than influenza for which we already have a vaccine. Showing that a vaccine is safer than covid-19 in young people is, therefore, tough.^{8,9}

Public debate, including on population immunity through both natural infection and future vaccination, is urgent.² My paper has been covered in national and international media with huge support from public and professionals. My views have been interrogated in detailed interviews by Wired (https://youtu.be/l1FFKT_VZ5c) and Contagion (<https://youtu.be/VbU6FYrnG8U>).

Population immunity through a mixture of vaccination and natural infection is the only long term solution for zero covid.²

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3071/rr>.

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