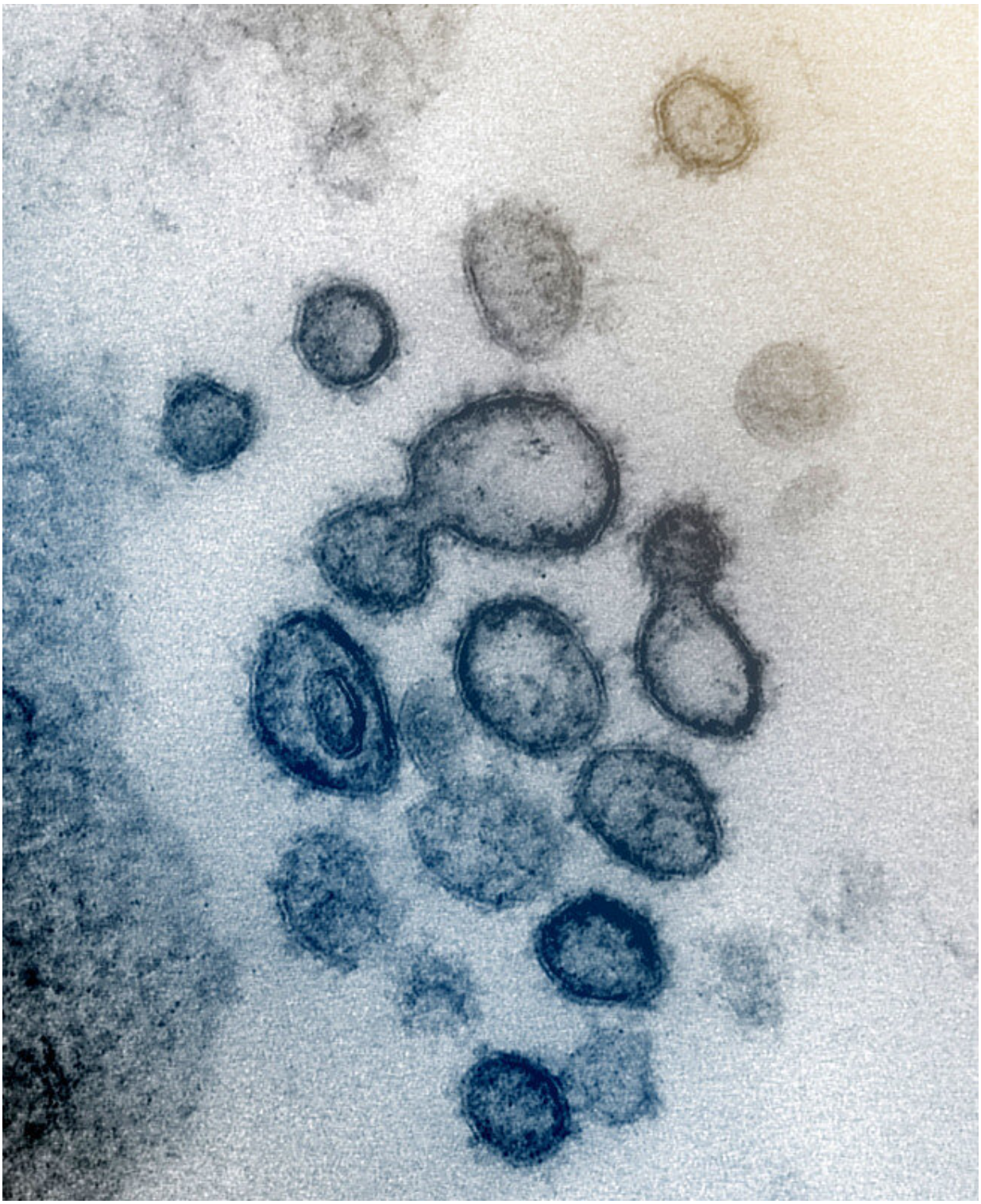
Britain's COVID-19 strategy 'risks 70,000 additional deaths'

March 23 2020



This transmission electron microscope image shows SARS-CoV-2 -- also known as 2019-nCoV, the virus that causes COVID-19 -- isolated from a patient in the US. Virus particles are shown emerging from the surface of cells cultured in the

lab. The spikes on the outer edge of the virus particles give coronaviruses their name, crown-like. Credit: NIAID-RML

Britain's strategy to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus could lead to up to 70,000 additional deaths this year, new research showed Monday.

Fears are growing that the crisis in Britain is following the same path as the one currently devastating Italy.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned on Sunday that the health service would be "overwhelmed".

More than 5,000 cases have been confirmed so far and 281 people have died from COVID-19 in Britain, according to official figures.

The toll mirrors the figures from just two weeks ago in Italy, where hundreds of people are dying from COVID-19 every day.

Although the government has announced a string of measures aimed at fighting the spread—including closing bars, pubs and restaurants—doctors are warning of an Italy-like situation unless stringent social distancing is implemented.

A team of researchers from University College London, the University of Cambridge and Health Data Research UK showed that the current approach could result in an additional 70,000 deaths.

They examined NHS patient data to determine the proportion of the population who are at higher risk of dying from COVID-19 and modelled the probability of their contracting deadly infections in various

scenarios.

They found that 20 percent of people in Britain were at risk because they were aged over 70 or had underlying health conditions, from diabetes to heart disease.

That is more than 13 million people, nearly 600,000 of whom would die this year on average—even without a deadly pandemic.

A failure to enforce a temporary lockdown has wasted valuable time and is likely to place unnecessary strain on health workers, resulting in additional COVID-19 deaths, the authors said.

"All the models we've seen so far are not clear about the background risk in terms of co-morbidities, and there's a gap of not knowing the excess deaths," said lead researcher Amitava Banerjee, UCL associate professor in clinical data science.

"We've tried to do that. The 70,000 are scenarios of excess deaths associated with coronavirus over a year," he told AFP.

'Where's the response?'

While Italy, France and Spain have all enforced near total lockdowns, Britain has taken a more piecemeal approach, not shuttering shops and bars until late last week.

Banerjee said that Britain's current tactics amounted to "partial suppression" and needed a rapid scaling up.

"We're all trying to think why we are not doing more in the UK and why are we waiting for our all-systems blazing response?" he said.

"If we'd moved a week ago, we could have kept the number of cases and deaths lower."

Downing Street was forced to deny a "highly defamatory" Sunday Times newspaper story that Johnson's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, had initially argued against strict measures to contain the virus, in an argument summed up as "if that means some pensioners die, too bad".

Banerjee pointed to how China successfully managed to contain the virus via extreme social distancing after an initial explosion in cases.

"We were slow to move from mitigation to partial suppression, compared to other countries but also our own data. We know we're underestimating and it's going up every day," he said.

"We seem to be presenting the idea that we (in Britain) are exceptional."

Citation: Britain's COVID-19 strategy 'risks 70,000 additional deaths' (2020, March 23) retrieved 1 April 2023 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-britain-covid-strategy-additional-deaths.html