

UK govt promises more virus tests as death toll jumps

April 1 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 on Wednesday recorded its biggest day-on-day increase in coronavirus deaths, as the government came under renewed pressure for its failure to mass test frontline medical staff, let alone the wider community.

A total of 2,352 people with COVID-19 have now died, up 563 on the previous day, out of 29,474 confirmed cases, an increase of 4,324, health ministry figures showed.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Health Secretary Matt Hancock and the heir to the throne, Prince Charles, have all tested positive for COVID-19.

The youngest victim was just 13. Ismail Mohamed Abdulwahab's family on Wednesday paid tribute to the "gentle and kind" teenager, who they said had no underlying health issues.

Officials have said they expect a surge in cases in the coming days, but hope the effects of a nationwide lockdown introduced on March 23 will then start to show.

But questions are growing about how long Britons will be asked to stay at home, amid a lack of mass testing.

Britain has tested 153,000 people so far. It reached 10,000 a day on Tuesday, and is aiming for 25,000 a day by mid April. Germany is currently testing 70,000 a day.

The vast majority of those being tested in Britain are patients in hospital, and there are concerns about the lack of tests for frontline medical staff.

Even media normally loyal to the governing Conservative party are now calling the situation a "shambles".

At the government's daily press briefing, Business Secretary Alok Sharma said increasing capacity was the "top priority".

Earlier, a spokesman for Johnson said more than 2,000 staff in the state-run National Health Service (NHS) had been tested so far.

Government minister Michael Gove has said the response had been hampered by a lack of "chemical reagents" needed for tests.

But the UK chemical industry has rejected the claim while the main opposition Labour party said the government needed to explain why there was such a difference with other countries.

"NHS staff are rightly asking if we've left it too late to buy the kits and chemicals we need, or whether our lab capacity is too overstretched after years of tight budgets," Labour's health spokesman Jonathan Ashworth said.

'Crisis' kit shortages

A joint statement from trade unions representing health and social workers on Wednesday reiterated concerns about a lack of protective clothing.

"It's now clear that the lack of personal protective equipment for frontline workers has become a crisis within a crisis," it said.

"Workers are being exposed to unreasonable and unnecessary risk."

In response, Sharma said that "over the past two weeks, we have delivered over 390 million PPE products", while a dedicated hotline had been set up for anyone who needed more.

Britain's total of confirmed cases and deaths only cover hospital admissions.

The Office for National Statistics suggested on Tuesday the true death toll could be 24 percent higher, after analysing data for deaths in the community where COVID-19 is suspected.

Prince Charles, 71, meanwhile issued a video message after coming out of self-isolation on Tuesday, praising the "remarkable NHS" and urging people to be optimistic.

"None of us can say when this will end, but end it will," he said.

"Until it does, let us all try and live with hope and, with faith in ourselves and each other, look forward to better times to come."

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