

Scientist defends Sweden's hotly debated virus strategy (Update)

June 3 2020, by David Keyton and Jan M. Olsen



State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell of the Public Health Agency of Sweden speaks during a news conference on a daily update on the coronavirus COVID-19 situation, in Stockholm, Sweden, Wednesday June 3, 2020. Tegnell has shown some contrition as criticism has grown over the country's approach of not locking down the country has resulted in one of the highest death rates per capita in the world. Tegnell told Swedish radio on Wednesday that "I think there is potential for improvement in what we have done in Sweden, quite clearly." (Anders Wiklund / TT via AP)

Sweden's chief epidemiologist on Wednesday defended his country's controversial coronavirus strategy, which avoided a lockdown but resulted in one of the highest per capita COVID-19 death rates in the world.

Anders Tegnell of the Public Health Agency denied that "the Swedish strategy was wrong and should be changed. That's not the case."

"We still believe that our strategy is good, but there is always room for improvement. ... You can always get better at this job," Tegnell told a news conference in Stockholm.

Sweden has stood out among European nations and the world for the way it has handled the pandemic, not shutting down the country or the economy like other nations but relying on citizens' sense of civic duty. Swedish authorities have advised people to practice social distancing, but schools, bars and restaurants have been kept open the entire time. Only gatherings of more than 50 people have been banned.

Tegnell's statement to reporters came after more contrite comments earlier in the day to Swedish radio in which he said "I think there is potential for improvement in what we have done in Sweden, quite clearly."

Asked if the country's high death toll has made him reconsider his unique approach to the pandemic, Tegnell told Swedish radio "yes, absolutely."



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some contrition as criticism has grown over the country's approach of not locking down the country has resulted in one of the highest death rates per capita in the world. Tegnell told Swedish radio on Wednesday that "I think there is potential for improvement in what we have done in Sweden, quite clearly."
(Anders Wiklund / TT via AP)

According to the national health agency, Sweden, a nation of 10.2 million people, has seen 4,542 deaths linked to COVID-19, which is far more than its Nordic neighbors and one of the highest per capita death rates in the world. Denmark has had 580 coronavirus deaths, Finland has seen 320 and Norway has had 237, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

"If we were to encounter the same disease again, knowing precisely what we know about it today, I think we would settle on doing something in between what Sweden did and what the rest of the world has done," Tegnell, considered the architect of the unique Swedish pandemic approach, told SR.

Still, authorities in Sweden, including Tegnell, have been criticized—and some have apologized—for failing to protect the country's elderly and nursing home residents.

But Tegnell said Wednesday it was still unclear what the country should have done differently. He also said other nations are unable to tell exactly what measures affected the outcomes of their outbreaks because they threw everything at the crisis at once.



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"Maybe we know that now, when you start easing the measures, we could get some kind of lesson about what else, besides what we did, you could do without a total shutdown," Tegnell said in the radio interview.

At the news conference, Tegnell made it clear that his previous

statement "was an admission that we always can become better. I'm sure my colleagues all over the world would say the same thing. There are always aspects which we could have handled this situation even better than we do today, now, as we learn more and more things," he told The Associated Press.

"Sometimes I feel like a personal punchbag, but that's OK. I can live with that," Tegnell added.

Sweden's COVID-19 infection rate of 43.2 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants is lower than Spain's (58.1) and Italy's (55.4), but is higher than reported rates in the United States (32.1) and Brazil (14.3), according to Johns Hopkins University.



State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, left, of the Public Health Agency of Sweden gives a daily update on the coronavirus COVID-19 situation, in Stockholm, Sweden, Wednesday June 3, 2020. Tagnell has shown some contrition as criticism has grown over the country's approach of not locking down the country has resulted in one of the highest death rates per capita in the world. Tegnell told Swedish radio on Wednesday that "I think there is potential for improvement in what we have done in Sweden, quite clearly." (Anders Wiklund / TT via AP)

Last week, the country's former state epidemiologist, Annika Linde, said in retrospect she believes an early lockdown could have saved lives in Sweden. Political pressure has also forced the Swedish government to speed up an investigation into the handling of the pandemic.

Ordinary Swedes are not sure what to think.

"I'm not walking around thinking that we have a real disaster here in Sweden," Jan Arpi, a 58-year-old sales executive, told The Associated Press. "I think we have it more or less under control, but we have to be even more careful now after we learned how the virus is spread, especially among elderly people."

Tegnell's pandemic tactics made Sweden a bit of a local pariah in the Nordics and didn't spare the Swedish economy.

Sweden's economy, which relies heavily on exports, is expected to shrink 7% in 2020 and the finance minister says the Scandinavian country is headed for "a very deep economic crisis."



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In this file photo dated Wednesday May 27, 2020, Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell of the Public Health Agency of Sweden speaks during a coronavirus news conference in Stockholm, Sweden. Sweden's chief epidemiologist has shown some contrition as criticism has grown over the country's hotly debated approach to fighting the coronavirus pandemic, Tegnell told Swedish radio Wednesday June 3, 2020, that "I think there is potential for improvement in what we have done in Sweden, quite clearly." (Pontus Lundahl / TT FILE via AP)

More than 76,000 people have been made redundant since the outbreak began and unemployment, which now stands at 7.9%, is expected to climb higher.

On the travel front, neighboring Norway and Denmark said they were dropping mutual border controls but would keep Sweden out of a Nordic

"travel bubble."

The Danes said they will reopen the border next month to residents of Germany, Norway and Iceland as the country eased its coronavirus lockdown. But Denmark, which has a bridge that goes directly into Sweden, has postponed a decision reopening to Swedish visitors until after the summer.

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