

Testing system for care homes a fiasco, putting elderly at risk

First person

Failure to learn lessons is undermining hard work of staff to keep residents safe, writes *Damian Tominey*

Having worked in healthcare for more than 50 years, I know that medicine is not an exact science. But the Government should have been better prepared for the coronavirus crisis. Its shambolic response to the pandemic has compromised one of the most vulnerable groups in our society – the elderly.

Much has been written about how care homes have fared in the outbreak but regardless of what the Prime Minister and Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary, may have you believe, I know from first-hand experience that the testing of staff and residents remains an unresolved fiasco.

At the nursing home I run in St Albans, my team and I are doing everything we possibly can to keep it safe and Covid-free.

We had rigid infection controls in place ahead of the Government's delayed response on care homes, and we have instituted extra infection control training.

As a result of everyone's hard work, we have mercifully not had any coronavirus deaths.

However, all this is being undermined by the scandal of the testing system failures that continue as if nothing has been learned by the various health agencies involved over the past six months.

Since responsibility for care homes was devolved to county councils around six weeks ago, we were told that we would be required to test all of our staff weekly, and all residents monthly. We swab on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and a courier from the "national hub" collects the samples at the end of each day for processing. Both Boris Johnson and Mr Hancock have claimed that people, on average, receive their test result within 24 hours.

We have been testing since July and have never received a result within 72 hours – let alone a day. For example,

we didn't receive the results of the swabs taken on Sept 3 until Sept 10 – a whole week later.

One test result didn't come back until the 12th – a wait of nine days.

When we did finally get the results back, they revealed that a cleaner and a resident had tested positive.

Both were asymptomatic and had been carrying on as usual in the intervening period.

Because of those two positive results, Hertfordshire county council intervened and told us we should revert from receiving tests from the national hub to the local "test, track and trace" team.

We duly complied, only to be told that rather than collecting the swabs daily, they would all be collected on the Friday instead.

When we inquired about what we were supposed to do with the swabs from Wednesday and Thursday – we were told that "as long as they were processed within 48 hours they would be OK".

But how could they be when the Wednesday swabs weren't even going to be collected until two days later?

So, we swabbed and waited for the local team to collect the samples at 2pm that Friday. No one turned up.

Already hard-pressed staff made countless frantic phone calls, to no avail.

A courier from the national hub then turned up to take the swabs away.

All 150 tests then went missing. More frantic phone calls ensued, again to no avail.

No one was able to "track and trace" the actual tests – let alone the results. Vital staffing hours were lost taking swabs that were never processed.

That episode followed a similar shambles the week before when we didn't receive any tests at all.

No explanation was ever given, despite more time being wasted trying to sort it out – on top of the difficult job of providing unparalleled geriatric care.

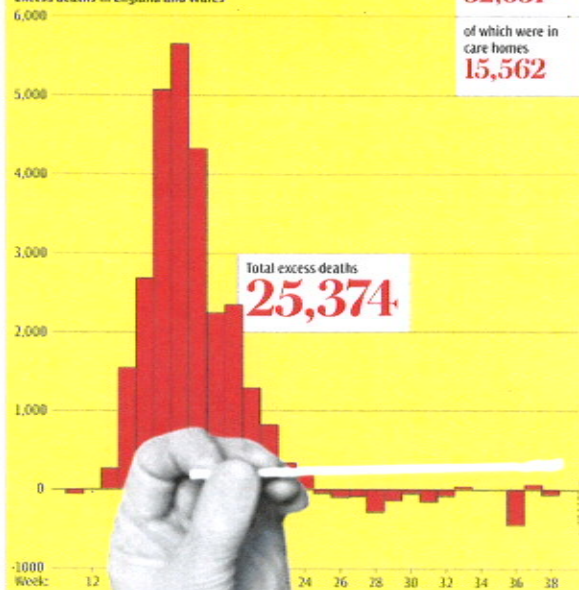
We were due to reopen to visitors yesterday after closing for 28 days following those two positive results.

But we have now been told we cannot reopen until all the residents have been tested again. By the time those results come back we will have

Vulnerable care homes on the brink of a second wave

Excess deaths above 5-year average in care homes

Excess deaths in England and Wales

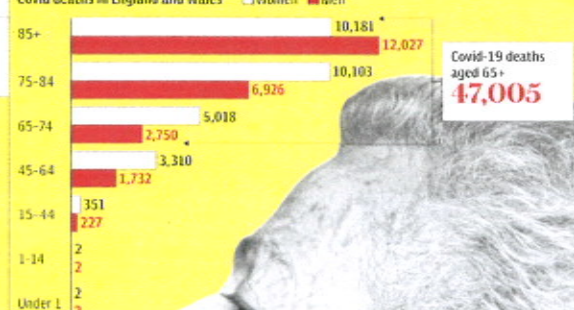


Total Covid-19 deaths **52,631**

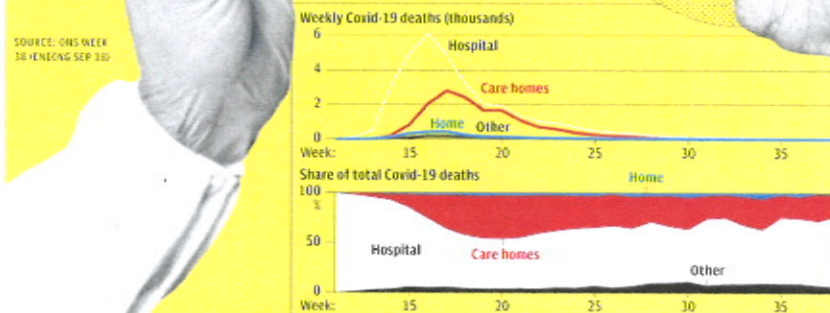
of which were in care homes **15,562**

Older people have been most at risk to death from the infection

Covid deaths in England and Wales



Covid-19 deaths by location



'All 150 tests went missing. No one was able to track and trace the actual tests – let alone the results'

been closed to visitors for six weeks, through no fault of our own. There has been a lot of criticism around people not being able to visit their loved ones – but in our case, it has been for reasons beyond our control.

We are equally powerless when it comes to the local surgery's decision to suspend all GP visits, meaning our residents have not been seen by their local doctor since March.

Instead, they have had to make do with phone and video calls even when many of them have highly complex conditions.

As a former GP myself, I find this lack of face-to-face contact completely unacceptable. We are "barrier nursing" to control infection, day in, day out – why on earth can't doctors do

the same to attend to their own patients?

The availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) also remains a problem. Although the Government continues to send masks and aprons, the staff would prefer gowns, so we have had to source them separately, at extra expense.

Our hand sanitiser suppliers have admitted that a lot of their stocks are being diverted to the NHS, leaving private operators in short supply.

The council – which has apologised for the "national" failure of a test system "beyond the control of local directors of public health" – gave us money for two months' of infection control but it didn't cover the full costs. Another £500 million has

'We are "barrier nursing" day in, day out – why can't doctors do the same to attend their own patients?'

apparently been allocated, but we haven't been told when it will be made available or what it will actually cover.

Meanwhile, we receive endless emails from various government agencies with lengthy and time-consuming advice which assumes a testing system that is faultless, all-encompassing and produces results within 24 hours. It doesn't.

I have no doubt that if infections run rampant through care homes again these same agencies will blame us as they have given us copious advice. But the advice is often useless in the absence of a robust testing system.

Dr Damian Tominey is a retired GP who runs Verulam House Nursing Home in St Albans, Herts