

# Public Health England's exaggerated death statistics are a scandal that has fed fear

Woefully misleading figures have only made it harder to tackle the pandemic and to get the country moving again

**MATTHEW LESH** 17 July 2020 • 6:00pm

Has Public Health England been exaggerating the Covid-19 daily death statistics? It appears that PHE compiles “out of hospital” deaths by searching the NHS database for whether that person ever tested positive. It then apparently fails to consider how long ago that person tested positive or their actual cause of death. “By this PHE definition, no-one with Covid in England is allowed to ever recover from their illness,” Professors Yoon K Loke and Carl Heneghan, who discovered the statistical flaw, explain.

It is astonishing: under these terms, a person who tested positive a few months ago but then gets hit by a bus this week would be recorded as a Covid death. In fact, if left unchanged, every single one of the 292,500 people who have tested positive will some day be a Covid-19 death statistic – even if they live for decades and die of completely unrelated causes. Health Secretary [Matt Hancock has ordered an urgent review](#).

This scandal has real consequences. It provides the impression that England is still experiencing over 100 deaths some days, while Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have near zero. It has played havoc with analysis about who is most at risk from the virus, be it by age or pre-existing condition. It also undermines our understanding of the extent of spread, hotspots and the steps required to combat the virus.

The PHE death figures have been reported every day in news bulletins and on newspaper front pages. They have fed into existing public anxieties that are holding people back from shopping, dining and drinking. They have also dissuaded people from [returning to work](#).

Covid-19 is a serious threat and Britain has among the highest death tolls in Europe, as measured most accurately in death certificates and excess mortality. But we need to be clear-eyed about the current risk.

The latest Office for National Statistics data shows that deaths in England and Wales are now slightly below the five-year average. There are fewer than a few thousand people in hospital with the virus and about 150 on ventilators. In London, there are fewer than 50 new cases most days, in Manchester it is less than a dozen and the entire South West’s case numbers have been in the single digits for the last week.

This latest scandal is just another example of PHE’s miserable handling of this crisis. PHE’s job is to track and prevent the outbreak of infectious diseases. It failed at the first hurdle. It neglected to ramp up testing earlier this year, rebuffing private sector offers. This led to the ill-fated decision to abandon testing and tracing in March.

PHE’s future is now very much in doubt. Perhaps it is time to put the quango out of its and our misery.

***Matthew Lesh is the head of research at the Adam Smith Institute***