

St Albans & Harpenden Patients' Group

Including Bricket Wood, Park Street, London Colney, Redbourn,
Sandridge & Wheathampstead

COVID-19 Public Meeting

On 27th May we held our first public meeting via ZOOM, when Prof. Jim McManus, Director of Public Health Services for Herts County Council. Jim spoke to us about COVID-19 and answered 12 pre-submitted and almost 20 on-air questions put by almost 40 members who took part.

Amongst many other points, Prof. McManus said that strictly speaking, the virus was Sars-COVID-2 and the disease it caused was Covid-19. There had been 2,768 recorded cases of infection and 862 COVID-related deaths in Herts. The rate of infection and death per 10,000 of the population varied from area to area in the county as a whole. In West Herts, they were highest in Watford and Hertsmere. In St. Albans the death rate was 6.8 per 10,000 and in absolute terms, there had been 101 deaths of which 75 were in hospitals and 26 in care homes. The rate of infection was falling but we were “not out of the woods yet”. The reproduction rate in Herts was relatively high at 0.8 and so we should prepare for a second wave.

There is no known vaccine and so as lock-down eases we should maintain social distancing and high levels of personal hygiene, especially hand washing. We should wear quality masks if in contact with vulnerable people and face coverings (not necessarily surgical-quality masks) might well be used in when social distancing is not possible, such as when making essential journeys on public transport. Masks and face coverings should be kept scrupulously clean.

Many thanks to Prof. McManus and to everyone who took part in a very successful Zoom meeting. We will make a copy of his presentation available to all members.

We hope to hold a series of Zoom events, please let us know if you have a topic that you would like to be covered in these!

National News

Since the Prime Minister’s broadcast on 10th May, giving a new Covid-19 slogan, “Stay Alert”, and announcing the easing of lock-down on 13th May, the government’s competence has been criticised. The protection of patients in care homes, the provision of personal protective equipment for NHS staff, the introduction of quarantine, and the start of testing and tracing, have all caused disputes.

The row about the P.M’s special advisor has led to further controversy and several of the government’s medical and scientific advisors have broken ranks and expressed doubts about the steps being taken to ease lock-down in the first week of June.

We now know a little more about Covid-19. Its symptoms are not just a new cough, fatigue and fever but include loss of taste and smell. It hits some social groups particularly hard:

ethnic minorities and the elderly. It spreads quickly in areas of high population density and high levels of daily travel.

It causes blood clots and organ damage, and the after-effects of delirium during treatment, and stress resulting from recovery in isolation, can cause lasting psychological damage.

Public opinion surveys show that more of the general public support easing lock-down slowly and safely than they do easing it quickly to stimulate economic recovery. They want to avoid a “second wave”, not surprisingly with a national death toll approaching 40,000 people.

Some academic experts have suggested that countries in west Europe were complacent about their health facilities and should have emulated Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, which used quarantine and testing and tracing to minimize infection and death, so should conduct in-depth reviews of the health facilities, and place more emphasis on public health and prevention.

The government has acted quickly in at least two respects, setting up a £600m. Infection Fund for care homes and a Race and Inequality Observatory to investigate the impact of race and inequality on people’s health.

Local News

Almost every care home in Herts has registered with the new fund and, in addition, the majority of care homes in West Herts already benefit from the HVCCG’s Care Home Improvement Team, which regularly visits and advises them. In Hertfordshire, Covid-19 issues have been handled by the Herts Resilience Forum, which meets three times a week and coordinates the work of the County Council, hospitals and clinical commissioning groups, etc. It is doing essential work to protect us from Covid-19. For example, coordinating the introduction of “whole home” testing in care homes, re-configuring town centres to facilitate safe queuing, re-aligning footpaths near school entrances, and encouraging local authorities to support small businesses.

In West Herts hospital capacity has been adapted to concentrate on Covid-19 cases, involving the temporary closure of the St. Albans City Hospital’s Minor Injuries Unit and the transference of much of Watford General’s Urgent Treatment work to Hemel Hospital. The opening of Watford’s Urgent Treatment Centre has been delayed.

However, we understand that a new Orthopaedic Outpatients’ Centre in St. Albans Hospital and that a new C.T. Scanner has been installed in Watford General’s A&E department, significantly speeding up diagnosis and treatment. Please let SAPG know if you know more about this. West Herts Hospitals Trust (WHHT) and the Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group (HVCCG) are learning from experience gained during the Covid-19 crisis, for example considering if it will be possible to make greater use of telephone and e-consultations so fewer people have to travel to GP surgeries and to outpatient appointments. They are actively considering how to restore the full range of non-Covid-19 services, but that seems some way off, and whilst social distancing continues we cannot expect a return to

Herts. The Sustainability and Transformation Partnership has now developed into an Integrated Care System, chaired by Paul Burstow (a former Lib-Dem MP and Coalition Minister) with Dr. Jane Halpin as its executive head. Dr. Halpin has worked in the NHS for 25 years as well as in the private sector. The ICS will have a budget of £32.bn a year and at present has 56,000 health and social care staff. It will be responsible for strategic decisions on health and social care and its three constituent Integrated Care Partnerships (West Essex, East and North Herts, Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Groups and their local hospitals) should collaborate to implement them.

West Herts Hospital

As many of us know, in July 2019 WHHT and HVCCG agreed to support Option One, which included extensive re-building at Watford General and work at Hemel and St. Albans hospitals. About £300m was suggested for Watford with £25m each for Hemel and St. Albans. (The Prime Minister was reported as promising an extra £50m.) WHHT submitted its Strategic Outline Case to the NHS. On 26th May 2020 WHHT and HVCCG issued an update explaining that they are now working on their Outline Business Case, which will also consider other options, and hope to engage patients and the public in an advisory Reference Group. We will send the update to all SAPG members so they can follow the link to apply to join the Reference Group.

Thanks again to everyone who Zoomed with us. Feel free to send in your ideas for future Zoom speakers and topics and forward this Newsletter to anyone likely to be interested, e.g. members of GP practice Patient Participation Groups.

John Wigley. (Chair SAPG) johnwigley33@yahoo.co.uk

Copyright © *St Albans & Harpenden Patients Group, All rights reserved

