

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Health (UK) > Epidemics (health, UK) > **Britain: Lifting England Covid rules while 3bn people unvaccinated reckless (...)**

Coronavirus

Britain: Lifting England Covid rules while 3bn people unvaccinated reckless - experts

Friday 28 January 2022, by [GREGORY Andrew](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2022).

Scientists warn Boris Johnson that failure means new Covid variants will put thousands of lives at risk across UK

Boris Johnson was urged to support efforts to suspend intellectual property rules that stop lower-income nations from manufacturing vaccines, tests, and treatments. Photograph: Jack Hill/AP

Boris Johnson has been accused of taking a reckless approach to public health by lifting [all plan B Covid restrictions in England](#) while failing to take enough action to get jabs to 3 billion unvaccinated people in poorer countries.

The prime minister has robustly defended his record on the pandemic this week while awaiting the findings of the [Sue Gray report](#) on the “partygate” scandal, insisting he “got the big calls right” on the biggest global health crisis in a century.

But now more than 300 leading scientists, health experts and academics have said his failure to take sufficient action to boost vaccination levels worldwide means it is more likely new variants will put thousands of lives at risk across the UK.

“We write to you as scientists, academics, and public health experts concerned about the emergence of the Omicron variant and the threat that future variants may pose to public health, the NHS, and the UK’s vaccination programme,” they said in a two-page letter delivered to 10 Downing Street.

“Vaccinating the vast majority of the world’s population is the best way to prevent Sars-CoV-2 from mutating. However, as the UK has provided booster doses to up to 1 million people every day, more than 3 billion people across the world have yet to receive their first dose. More boosters have been delivered in rich countries than the total number of all doses administered so far in poorer nations.

“Allowing huge numbers of people in low- and middle-income countries to remain unvaccinated is a reckless approach to public health that creates conditions where new Sars-CoV-2 variants of concern are more likely to develop.”

The letter has been signed in a personal capacity by 13 members of Johnson’s Sage committee and subcommittees, a fellow at the UK [Health Security Agency](#) and an adviser to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Nigel Crisp, the former chief executive of the NHS in England, Nobel prize winner Sir Richard Roberts, and several World Health Organization advisers are also among the signatories.

They called on Johnson to allow low- and middle-income countries to manufacture Covid vaccines, tests, and treatments for themselves. Vaccinating the vast majority of the world's population was the best way to prevent further coronavirus variants of concern, they added, including variants that could be more infectious or render current vaccines less effective.

They urged the prime minister to put public health before the interests of the pharmaceutical industry "to prevent another year of uncertainty and tragedy" by supporting international efforts to [suspend intellectual property rules](#) that stop lower-income nations from manufacturing vaccines, tests, and treatments.

Vaccines will not be effective at stopping new variants of concern from arising "unless we share this technology with the world and increase global vaccination coverage", they added in the letter coordinated by science and health experts working with groups including Global Justice Now.

Crisp said: "Throughout this pandemic, the government has pledged that it will follow the science. The scientific evidence has been clear since the start of the pandemic that the best way to keep ourselves and our NHS safe from new variants is to vaccinate the world.

"However laudable donations of vaccines might be, they will never be enough to end the pandemic. There is untapped manufacturing capacity in the very nations that need vaccines and treatments most. For the sake of people's lives in those countries and our own, we must use it."

Laura Merson, associate director of the Infectious Diseases Data Observatory at the University of Oxford, said protection provided by boosters would be "critically limited" while most of the world remained unvaccinated.

"The easing of plan B restrictions may give the impression that the pandemic is coming to an end," she said. "But this won't be over until we address the risk of new variants at the root - in populations that have not had access to vaccines."

Maryam Shahmanesh, professor of global health at UCL, added: "By ignoring the demands of low- and middle-income countries and stifling global vaccine production with arbitrary intellectual property rules, the government risks prolonging the pandemic and endangering countless lives. We need a complete step-change if we are to bring this pandemic to an end for everyone."

Andrew Gregory Health editor

P.S.

- The Guardian. Fri 28 Jan 2022 00.01 GMT:
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