SHAMEFUL ACTS OF DISREGARD

Just as the British public was breathing a tentative sigh of relief that the National Health Service appeared to have survived the peak of the coronavirus epidemic, evidence emerged that this may have come at a catastrophic cost. The epidemic is still raging unchecked, with the number of cases increasing exponentially in care homes across the country. It was into such homes that many elderly and infirm patients were discharged from hospital when, in a state of near panic, the order was given to clear hospital wards for an expected flood of Covid-19 cases from the general public.

The fear in government circles was that the NHS would be overwhelmed, and its capacity, particularly for dealing with seriously ill cases in intensive care units, would be stretched beyond breaking point. With this in mind, under NHS directives issued on 19 March and 2 April, residential and nursing homes were told to expect to receive patients deemed to be no longer benefiting from hospital care. They were being discharged from NHS hospitals regardless of whether they had coronavirus symptoms and regardless of whether they had been tested.

Spokespersons for the care-home industry protested in vain, describing this policy as "reckless" and "unfathomable". Elderly people are in residential homes or nursing homes because they can no longer care for themselves at home, usually because of a chronic medical condition. These are ideal conditions for a highly contagious disease to spread like wildfire. A bad situation was made much worse by the national shortage of personal protective equipment – face masks, gowns and gloves – with which those dealing with Covid-19 cases are supposed to protect themselves. Staff in care homes were given lower priority than NHS staff in the distribution of these supplies. They still do not have enough.

The privately-run care-home sector was already at breaking point, with something like 100,000 staff vacancies and much evidence of serious under-funding. Governments have repeatedly promised to tackle this crisis and repeatedly failed to do so. Up to two weeks ago, the official statistics on deaths caused by the coronavirus did not even include those dying in care homes. This betrays an attitude of indifference to the elderly. Boris Johnson, in his first public statement after his own discharge from hospital, declared: "We are now beginning to turn the tide. If this virus were a physical assailant... then this is the moment we have begun together to wrestle it to the floor." He could not say that if he took the acceleration in the number of deaths in care homes seriously.

A third of all coronavirus deaths in England and Wales are now happening in care homes. Numbers are rapidly rising and there is no reason to expect things to improve in the near future. Official statistics show that in the two weeks to 2 April care homes reported 4,343 deaths from coronavirus. Half of them came in the last five days. It looks as if the lives of the elderly have been sacrificed to protect the political reputations of government ministers. That is shameful and intolerable.

LIFTING THE LOCKDOWN
PRUENCE IS THE KEY WORD

Whether and when to relax the coronavirus lockdown has become the big political talking point across Europe, the United States and elsewhere. All have imposed social distancing rules and banned any sort of gathering, such as in offices, factories, shops, restaurants, theatres and sports stadiums. And churches. In every case the rate of spread of the virus in the general population has effectively been reduced to the point where the disease can be said to be contained.

The key word here is "prudence", which means assessing the risks and making a carefully balanced judgement. Part of the impetus to relax the lockdown comes from commerce and industry, where the economic damage has already been massive. Many jobs have been lost, and some businesses could be extinguished altogether, making it much harder to revive the economy after the lockdown is over. And a functioning economy is necessary to pay for the welfare state, the National Health Service, and all the other functions of government.

Some of the clamour for immediate relaxation comes from libertarians, who resent any interference by the state in their freedom to act. And part comes from conservative voices who want to restore as much as possible of the status quo ante. They include some Catholics who are dismayed by the suspension of public Masses and want the suspension lifted so parish life can resume. They are unwise. The epidemic is ready to explode again if given the slightest chance, and human lives would be put at risk. To save life is a moral obligation under the Fifth Commandment. The increasing pressure to relax the lockdown now rather than to wait is not coming primarily from ordinary people, who have complied with the restrictions on their freedom to a degree that has surprised politicians and behavioural psychologists. That suggests one possible route ahead in the coming weeks – to make social distancing voluntary where possible, rather than a legal requirement.

It is clear that there are enterprises that can function with social distancing in place. Supermarkets and chemists are the obvious examples. The principle of one-in-one-out creates queues at the door, with queues responsibly spacing themselves to preserve a two-metre separation. This would allow the phased reopening of garden centres, clothes shops and other businesses. They could insist on face masks if they thought it necessary. Though it is too soon for anything like organised worship in large groups to be prudent, social distancing and one-in-one-out could allow parish churches to be open for a time each day for individual prayer, and perhaps for small funerals.

Nevertheless, most discussions of lifting lockdown are based on a false premise, namely that a declining number of cases in the general population means the outbreak is under control, and eventually the public can forget about it. That will not happen until an effective vaccine is widely available. What is being achieved instead is merely suppression, with a new flare-up, the so-called second spike, a constant threat.