

BBC 'misrepresented' Covid risk to boost lockdown support, inquiry told

Epidemiologist Prof Mark Woolhouse criticised corporation for reporting rare deaths among healthy adults as the norm during pandemic

[Simon Johnson](#), Scottish Political Editor 25 January 2024 • 11:47am



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The BBC was allowed to “misrepresent” the risk posed by Covid to most people to boost public support for lockdown, the [UK Covid Inquiry](#) has heard.

Prof Mark Woolhouse, an eminent epidemiologist and government

adviser, lambasted the corporation for having "repeatedly reported rare deaths or illnesses among healthy adults as if they were the norm".

He said this created the "misleading impression" among BBC News viewers at the start of the pandemic that "we are all at risk" and "the virus does not discriminate".

In reality, he said it was known at the time that the risk of dying from Covid was 10,000 times higher in the over-75s than the under-15s.

But Prof Woolhouse told the inquiry the BBC did not correct its reporting, saying: "I suspect this misinformation was allowed to stand throughout 2020 because it provided a justification for locking down the entire population."

Prof Mark Woolhouse said BBC coverage during the pandemic led to a 'misperception' of the risk of Covid
Credit: UNPIXS

He said further evidence of this was provided by a briefing dated March 22, 2020, by a sub-group of the UK Government's Scientific Advisory

Group for Emergencies (Sage) that focused on the public's behaviour.

This stated that "a substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened; it could be that they are reassured by the low death rate in their demographic group... the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging".

Prof Woolhouse said the "misperception" created by the BBC's coverage that everyone was at risk was a "barrier to targeting interventions at the vulnerable minority who truly were at high risk from Covid".

In his written submission to the inquiry about the impact north of the Border, he said: "I fear that [the Scottish Government's pandemic response](#) was compromised as a result."

He also concluded that lockdown had been "least effective at protecting the most vulnerable precisely because of their need to have contacts with health care and social care workers - self-isolation was not an option."

The expert added: "This should have been recognised from the outset."

'Climate of fear' in BBC during pandemic

Prof Woolhouse, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh, was an adviser to the Scottish Government during the pandemic, although his submission said his advice was often not heeded by Nicola Sturgeon.

He also sat on the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, which was another sub-group of Sage.

The submission was published after he gave evidence to the inquiry on Wednesday. It is sitting in Edinburgh to examine the Scottish Government's handling of the pandemic.

Last year, The Telegraph spoke to current and former BBC journalists who described a “climate of fear” existing in the corporation during the pandemic, with experienced reporters “openly mocked” if they questioned the wisdom of lockdowns, or called “dissenters”.

Some complained to senior managers about the BBC’s blinkered stance but were ignored. Others communicated via secretive WhatsApp groups to share their frustrations, like members of a resistance movement.

Prof Woolhouse said the public was “not given accurate information” about Covid in the early stages of the pandemic.

“Some media sources - notably the BBC television news - did repeatedly misrepresent the risk posed by Covid,” he said.

“One example is that they gave the impression that hospitals were being overwhelmed during the first wave. Some (mainly in London) were, but overall hospital bed occupancy was at an all-time low during that period.

“A second example is that they routinely reported deaths of healthy young adults, thereby giving the impression that these were common. In reality, such deaths were extremely rare; the great majority of Covid deaths occurred in the elderly, frail and infirm.”

He concluded: “Possibly, this kind of coverage was an attempt to back up government public health messaging; for example, the hugely misleading claim that ‘we are all at risk!’”

A BBC spokesperson said: “We reported on the pandemic in line with the BBC’s rigorous editorial standards – using a range of official and scientific sources. We reported on events in the UK and across the world as they happened - featuring ongoing analysis from a range of medical and scientific experts, as well as a range of voices and opinions, including those sceptical of lockdowns.

"We do not recognise this description of our working environment; we encourage robust editorial discussion."

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