Twitter Thread by Peter Foster

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Remember the government wanting to "follow the science"? It is remarkable how far it is ignoring scientific advice on this new ultra-infectious variant of #Covid-19 by keeping schools open... both SAGE and @imperialcollege issuing warnings on school closures. Stay with me. /1

@imperialcollege First the @imperialcollege paper, which finds that the new variant is still being ultra-infectious despite November lockdowns - link here, but cases of new variant trebled in SEast, even under lockdown /2

https://t.co/fdvuVX3OkW

has higher transmissibility than non-VOC lineages, even if the VOC has a different latent period or generation time. Available SGTF data indicate a shift in the age composition of reported cases, with a larger share of under 20 year olds among reported VOC than non-VOC cases. Fourth, we assess the association of VOC frequency with independent estimates of the overall SARS-CoV-2 reproduction number through time. Finally, we fit a semi-mechanistic model directly to local VOC and non-VOC case incidence to estimate the reproduction numbers over time for each. There is a consensus among all analyses that the VOC has a substantial transmission advantage, with the estimated difference in reproduction numbers between VOC and non-VOC ranging between 0.4 and 0.7, and the ratio of reproduction numbers varying between 1.4 and 1.8. We note that these estimates of transmission advantage apply to a period where high levels of social distancing were in place in England; extrapolation to other transmission contexts therefore requires caution.

@imperialcollege The paper then notes (given schools were open and under 20s are most infected): "A particular concern is whether it will be possible to maintain control over transmission while allowing schools to reopen in January 2021." /3

Early versions of our analyses informed the UK government policy response to this VOC and that of other countries. The substantial transmission advantage we have estimated the VOC to have over prior viral lineages poses major challenges for ongoing control of COVID-19 in the UK and elsewhere in the coming months. Social distancing measures will need to be more stringent than they would have otherwise. A particular concern is whether it will be possible to maintain control over transmission while allowing schools to reopen in January 2021. These policy questions will be informed by the ongoing urgent epidemiological investigation into this variant, most notably examining evidence for any changes in severity, but also giving more nuanced understanding into transmissibility changes, for instance in the household setting.

@imperialcollege This echoes what govt science advisory SAGE cmme told ministers on Dec 22...that it was "highly unlikely" the R number can be kept below 1 (cases falling, it is currently 1.1-1.3) with schools open /4

https://t.co/yV5qcSkErJ

evidence for differences in routes of transmission or different survival on surfaces.

11. It is highly unlikely that measures with stringency and adherence in line with the measures in England in November (i.e. with schools open) would be sufficient to maintain R below 1 in the presence of the new variant. R would be lower with schools closed, with closure of secondary schools likely to have a greater effect than closure of

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primary schools. It remains difficult to distinguish where transmission between children takes place, and it is important to consider contacts made outside of schools.

12. It is not known whether measures with similar stringency and adherence as Spring, with both primary and secondary schools closed, would be sufficient to bring R below 1 in the presence of the new variant. The introduction of Tier 4 measures in England combined with the school holidays will be informative of the strength of measures required to control the new variant but analysis of this will not be possible until mid-January.

@imperialcollege But on Dec 30 Gavin Williamson announce primaries would go back, and secondary schools would have staggered return while testing regime (lateral flow, not that sensitive) was set up - see statement here /5

https://t.co/U0LPgXXO55

@imperialcollege This thread by @dgurdasani1 unpicks the details...shows where things are headed. Tl;dr the point is that a more transmissible virus mutation is more dangerous than the virus becoming more lethal - but with same transmissibility. /6

https://t.co/8gx4T2yNkB

> The Imperial report on the new UK B117 strain is out. Very concerning findings, that highlight why we need to act on this *now*. These findings suggest that the situation within the UK is likely to get much worse than it is now. Here's why-
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> Thread.
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> — Deepti Gurdasani (@dgurdasani1) December 31, 2020

@imperialcollege @dgurdasani1 There are signs of pressure telling...like this @guardian story saying that Gov will include London boroughs in group of primaries in south that wont open /7

@imperialcollege @dgurdasani1 @guardian Apols - link here - still to be confirmed, but perhaps a belwether? /8

https://t.co/jOeAnn7wXb

@imperialcollege @dgurdasani1 @guardian In any event (and I write as a parent of a GCSE student who is v keen indeed that they should do their exams) what is clear is that the government is following this schools policy despite clear assertions from scientists that R will surge, given new variant infectiousness /9

@imperialcollege @dgurdasani1 @guardian At the same time - even before schools go back - the warning lights are starting to blink on the hospitals dashboard. Nightingales (for which it is not clear there are sufficient staff) are being talked about etc. /10

@imperialcollege @dgurdasani1 @guardian Just like with the Christmas changes, it seems hard - given where we are apparently headed - that the govt holds its line. And if does, for how long? And if numbers climb too high, well, the scientific warnings are there in black and white....tough weeks ahead. ENDS