Twitter Thread by Dr Benjamin 'Ward Viking' Janaway ■



Dr Benjamin 'Ward Viking' Janaway ■
@drjanaway

Lord Sumption to a lady with stage 4 cancer:

'I didn't say your life was not valuable, I said it was less valuable.'

Let's really break this down and realise just how awful a statement it is and the repercussions it may

Firstly, it's more than worth saying it was an abhorrent and thoughtless comment devoid of empathy. No matter what utilitarian argument you may field, it cannot be made on a 1:1 basis, or on the inherent value of life. That is beyond any of us.

The secondary issue here, the primary being how this person now feels and will feel, is the impact it will have on those in similar positions and how the public may perceive this overall and in groups. This may be complicated.

A large public outcry built of empathy is inevitable, and I am doing the same here. It is callous and cruel. But the complexity of balancing resources is one where decisions made on population levels will inevitably leave deserving people left behind. I hate that.

Balancing a pandemic with urgent services was always going to be tricky. Both are urgent, both require resources, and the NHS has adapted as it can. The most urgent of non-covid cases are being dealt with as rapidly as possible, but we cannot say that everything will be caught.

And that's before you factor in human nature, such as avoiding seeking medical help for concerning symptoms, or lack of access to services (real or perceived.) One of the major dangers of the pandemic was, and is, the impact on 'normal' care, we only have one boat.

But at no point has any healthcare professional ever believed that this is an easy choice. We don't want this choice. We hate this choice. We loathe the people that put us in this position by their poor planning and ignorance. A competent government would have stopped this.

For Sumption to make this statement plays right into the idea that these people are being overlooked or forgotten. They, explicitly, are not. I work in mental health, which is suffering, and the evidence of delays is clear. We are all working to serve two impossible tasks.

Sumption went on to say (paraphrased) that COVID is mainly fatal to the elderly (true overall,) and then used this as justification to end lockdown. This ignores the basics of limiting viral spread. And this man is educated enough to know this, but not enough to remove his view

At the same time he justifies his claims around lockdown by saying 'All lives are not of equal value - the older you are, the less valuable yours is because there's less of it left." The same, carrying his argument, can be extended to those with cancer. This is not how we live.

We cannot both simultaneously hold on to protecting the elderly (en masse) and claim their lives are 'less valuable', but at the same time tell cancer patients the same thing and 'not protect them.' The argument is as incongruent as diabolical. All life is of equal value a priori

He then argues; 'The argument is that if the young fit and health get Covid they will pass it on to the old and vulnerable but that is not correct because the old and vulnerable can isolate themselves if they want to.' This would never work in practice, or morally.

Older people have the same value as anybody with cancer, and both have the same value as the young and 'fit'. It is not for the individual to decide on rationalisation the value of life on a 1:1. We are forced by nature to make hard decisions on large scales...

but on an individual level, we give it all we have got. It doesn't matter to me who you are, and this is true of all staff, we are there to save both life quantity and quality, no matter the stakes or background. We are all entitled to the same opportunity, the right to life.

For Lord Sumption to say this is a huge misunderstanding of the forced utilitarian policy that dominates healthcare. No boat, unless built large and with proper resources (conservatives..) can manage everybody, especially during a storm. But we do not work with this mantra 1:1.

Medicine is about saving lives on a 1:1 level in a world where the 1:1000000 makes the stakes in resources, but is irrelevant when someone is in front of you. You do your damn best, because that's human. If you a prior write people off for any reason, its eugenics.

If Sumptions argument was 'your life is just as valuable, but we have more time (if this is true) to treat you' then this is rational argument. But this was not his argument. The delay in other treatments is about likelihood of survival balanced with resources, not life value

Not only has Sumption misunderstood the principles of utilitarianism, he has couched it as a moral judgement on a personal level. For this he can take a flying f**k at a rolling donut, and reconsider his ethics. And this overlooks his longterm misunderstanding of lockdown neeed.

We may now fear that those vulnerable, who we are doing this TO PROTECT, (and thank you all,) will genuinely believe that they are worth less because a high ranking public figure said it. There are people who will already believe this who will use it to push their agendas.

So what I will say is this. You are JUST AS VALUABLE as anyone else. You are not forgotten. You are not ignored. We think about you all the time. We agonise over making you wait. The hand of God has not been kind, and we are mortal and struck for resources.

Ending lockdown early won't fix this, it will make it worse. Resources will still be used, and more. The quicker we end this virus, the better. Our government fucked around for a year, and these are the crops we reap. We do our best, and for Sumption to say what he did...

is an indication that there is another sickness in this country, and unfortunately its one that can spread on a word. We lockdown because we see life as of equal value, not because we don't.

Tldr

Resource allocation is made on survival, not value. The former is a quantitative clinical metric, the latter subjective. The former can be rationalised, the latter not.