# Nobel laureates criticise UK government delay on routine NHS COVID-19 testing



The ongoing public inquiry into the UK's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed significant concerns regarding the government's response to advice on routine testing for healthcare workers. Notably, two Nobel Prize-winning scientists, Sir Paul Nurse and Sir Peter Ratcliffe, admonished the then Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, for failing to act on their urgent recommendations. In a letter dated April 14, 2020, they articulated their grave concerns about asymptomatic transmissions and the potential risks to both healthcare staff and patients. Despite the pressing nature of their advice, a response was not forthcoming until July 2020—over three months later.

This delay is now being scrutinised for its possible repercussions. Sir Paul highlighted the unsettling reality of not receiving a timely reply from a government official regarding a critical health issue, stating, "For the secretary of state to ignore a letter from two Nobel laureates in physiology or medicine for three months is a little surprising." It is believed that the lack of routine testing during the early stages of the pandemic may have contributed to higher rates of infection and mortality in hospitals and care homes.

Initial testing efforts during the pandemic were characterised by a frenetic push to meet ambitious targets. Hancock's government set a goal of conducting 100,000 COVID-19 tests per day by the end of April 2020. Yet, throughout the early months of the pandemic, the understanding of COVID-19 as a disease that could be transmitted by asymptomatic individuals was rapidly gaining traction among the scientific community. Despite this knowledge, NHS workers and care home staff were not routinely tested until November 2020, unless they presented with symptoms.

The letter from Nurse, Ratcliffe, and their colleague Dr Sam Barrell urged immediate implementation of surveillance systems across NHS trusts to facilitate regular testing. They warned that without these measures, the virus risked widespread transmission within healthcare environments, compromising both staff safety and patient care. The government’s eventual response merely acknowledged that testing was a “key part” of their strategy, failing to address the scientists' specific concerns regarding asymptomatic cases directly.

As the inquiry progresses, it is clear that the decision-making process and the subsequent actions taken—or not taken—by the government in response to expert warnings will face critical examination. The oversight in prioritising the health of frontline workers and the vulnerable populations they serve raises essential questions about the efficacy of the government's public health strategies during the pandemic. With Hancock and other health officials slated to appear at the inquiry in the coming weeks, the testimonies may further illuminate the ramifications of delayed action in critical health directives.

The accounts from Sir Paul and other scientists, shedding light on the bureaucratic hurdles faced in early pandemic decision-making, will remain pivotal in understanding the broader implications of the UK's healthcare response. As the inquiry continues, the lessons drawn from these events will be integral to shaping more effective health policies to safeguard against future public health crises.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
2. Paragraphs 1, 2
3. Paragraph 3
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwywj1nj7jwo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwywj1nj7jwo> - In April 2020, Nobel laureates Sir Paul Nurse and Sir Peter Ratcliffe sent a letter to UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock, urging routine COVID-19 testing for all healthcare workers. They expressed concerns about asymptomatic transmission and its potential impact on infection rates. The scientists received a delayed response in July 2020, which did not directly address their concerns. The lack of timely action is believed to have contributed to increased infections and deaths in healthcare settings during the early stages of the pandemic.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/uk-scientists-call-for-immediate-covid-19-testing-of-healthcare-workers> - A group of UK scientists, including Sir Paul Nurse and Sir Peter Ratcliffe, called for immediate COVID-19 testing of all healthcare workers. They highlighted the risks of asymptomatic transmission and urged the government to implement regular testing to protect both staff and patients. The appeal emphasized the need for proactive measures to control the spread of the virus within healthcare settings.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/06/uk-government-responds-to-scientists-call-for-covid-19-testing-of-healthcare-workers> - The UK government responded to the appeal from scientists for routine COVID-19 testing of healthcare workers. The response, issued in July 2020, acknowledged the importance of testing but did not directly address the specific concerns raised by the scientists regarding asymptomatic transmission. The delay in response and lack of direct action were points of contention among healthcare professionals and scientists.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-53161243> - In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government set a target of 100,000 daily tests by the end of April 2020. This initiative aimed to increase testing capacity and support the identification and isolation of COVID-19 cases. The strategy was part of broader efforts to control the spread of the virus and protect public health.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/uk-scientists-call-for-immediate-covid-19-testing-of-healthcare-workers> - A group of UK scientists, including Sir Paul Nurse and Sir Peter Ratcliffe, called for immediate COVID-19 testing of all healthcare workers. They highlighted the risks of asymptomatic transmission and urged the government to implement regular testing to protect both staff and patients. The appeal emphasized the need for proactive measures to control the spread of the virus within healthcare settings.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/06/uk-government-responds-to-scientists-call-for-covid-19-testing-of-healthcare-workers> - The UK government responded to the appeal from scientists for routine COVID-19 testing of healthcare workers. The response, issued in July 2020, acknowledged the importance of testing but did not directly address the specific concerns raised by the scientists regarding asymptomatic transmission. The delay in response and lack of direct action were points of contention among healthcare professionals and scientists.