

Interview with Johan Giesecke, Swedish epidemiologist

Tim says: “Squabbling scientists, experts and commentators fill newspapers and airwaves with contradictory arguments – this interview on Aussie TV (29 April) with Swedish former chief epidemiologist Johan Giesecke made the most sense to me... and he accurately predicted, in April, the problems which Australia and New Zealand have recently experienced, perhaps through excessive reliance on lockdowns.”

Sky News: *You've been a strong critic of the idea of lockdowns, Sweden has avoided these sort of lockdowns that we're seeing here in Australia. Tell us your thoughts – are lockdowns the correct way to go?*

Johan: You introduced me by saying that I would say that you got it all wrong. I don't think you got it all wrong, but you painted yourself into a corner and I'm watching with interest how you and 100 other countries will climb out of the lockdown, because I don't think any government that I know gave a minute's thought about how they would get out of the different lockdowns that are installed.

Take the school closure for example, if you close the schools, when are you going to open them, what's the criteria?

I don't think anyone thought about that when the closure was decided on. Anyway, so Sweden doesn't have such a strict lockdown, there are a few things that are forbidden – the crowd can't be more than 50 people, at restaurants that are mostly open, there should be 5ft or 1.5 meters between the tables, you have to sit down to eat, there are a few things like that, but rather mild things... there are very few laws and [regulations] passed, you can go out without being stopped by the police and fined or threatened with prison and mostly we talk about trust... we trust the people – people are not stupid.

That's... the basic line [in Sweden]. If you tell people what's good for them and what's good for their neighbours and other people, they do that. You take a restriction that's sensible and understandable, people will follow it.

Sky News: *You said that you think the results are going to be similar across most countries regardless of the approach they've taken, can you take us through that?*

Johan: There is a tsunami of a rather mild infection spreading around the globe and I think that's there's very little chance to stop it by any measure we take.

Most people will become infected by this and most people won't even notice. We have data now from Sweden that shows between 98 and 99 percent of the cases have

had a very mild infection or didn't even realise they were infected.

So we have this spread of this mild disease around the globe and most of it is happening where we don't see it.

It's among people that don't get very sick, spread it to someone else that doesn't get very sick and what we're looking at is a thin layer at the top of people who do develop the disease and even thinner layer of people that go into intensive care and then even thinner layer of people who die.

But the real outbreak is happening where we don't see it.

Sky News: *So....you're saying that at some point pretty much everybody is going to get this disease to some degree or another.*

Here in Australia we've done an incredibly good job suppressing it.

I'm wondering do you think we've done too good a job, is it possible to do too good a job suppressing it in the early stages such that you won't ever be able to take the foot off the break on your restrictions to get the disease just to a manageable flow of cases that the health system, which we were told this was all about preparing for that, be allowed to handle the cases as they come through.

Johan: Yes... one point is to flatten the curve a bit so that the health care isn't overused.

You may succeed, and New Zealand may also succeed, but I've been asking myself when New Zealand or Australia has stamped out every case in the country, what do you do for the next 30 years.

Will you close your borders completely? Quarantine everyone who is going to Australia or New Zealand? Because the disease will be out there. I don't know how you are going to handle that.

That's your problem.

Sky News: *You've said you think in most countries regardless of the measures we take, eg. Taiwan has been very successful and other countries like Italy have been disaster cases, but you think at the end of the day they're all pretty much going to end up with the same fatalities, the same results, the same deaths regardless of what measures they took. Explain that.*

Johan: Yes. Basically I think it will be the same because, like

I said, the real epidemic is invisible and it's going on all the time around us.

The other thing with a lockdown is when you open it, you will have more cases, so the countries who pride themselves in having a few deaths now, will get these deaths when they start lifting the lockdown.

Sky News: *Tell us briefly about the Imperial College results that sparked this worldwide panic.*

You believe they were flawed, these were the initial results that were coming out and the modelling that was saying millions are gonna die.

You thought that was flawed, tell us why.

Johan: Yes, there are a few procedural things... One is that the paper was never published which is normal scientific behaviour.

The second thing it wasn't peer-reviewed, which means it wasn't looked upon by other people, which is also normal scientific procedure.

So it was more like an internal departmental communication, a memo.

And then the big mistake of the Imperial group was underestimating the proportion of the very mild cases that would never be detected, that's the main thing with that prediction.

And it's fascinating how it changed the policy of the world.

The UK made a U-turn overnight [upon] the publication of the paper which is fascinating.

So, yes, there were several other mistakes with the paper, but it gets very technical to get into that.

Sky News: *You mention that the overwhelming majority of people that get this disease have no symptoms or very minimal symptoms.*

Do we even know the real fatality rate of the coronavirus?

Johan: No. Well it's around 0.1%.

Sky News: *We were told it was 3% initially, initially 2%, are you saying now that it's 0.1%, that's pretty much the same fatality rate as the regular flu isn't it?*

Johan: I think it's a bit higher actually. I said before in Sweden that this is like a severe influenza. I don't think that's completely true – it will be a bit more severe than the influenza, maybe double, but not tenfold.

Sky News: *With all of the health care systems focusing on flattening the curve and being prepared for these waves of infection, which aren't necessarily coming because of the very restrictive measures, overall are we gonna see more people dying, we talked a little bit about this before on the show, of cancers, heart attacks, things like that, simply because they're too scared to go to the hospital because they think they won't get treated.*

Is there going to be other deaths that are going to be caused by our overweighing focus just on this one particular disease?

Johan: Could well be.

The emergency rooms here in Stockholm have about 50% of the usual number of patients coming in, and one reason is probably that people are scared of contracting the disease when they go into hospitals, and another is that, I think, they say they can wait a bit until the thing is over.

Sky News: *You've said the best policy, the correct policy, would be to simply protect the old and the frail. Is that correct?*

Johan: Yes, and that's the Swedish model. It has... two pillars.

One is only use measures that are evidence-based.

And there are two that are evidence-based... one is washing hands... we've known that for 150 years since Semmelweis in Austria a long time ago.

The other is social distancing. If you don't get too close to other people, they won't infect you.

And the third may be trust people.

People are not stupid, if you tell them what's good for them they will do what you say.

You don't need soldiers on the street – and police.

It's unnecessary.

● Transcript of interview, Swedish former chief epidemiologist Johan Giesecke, Sky News Australia – 29 April 2020

Note from editor: For a contrary view to Tim's, see comments from Professor Helen Ward of Imperial College on page 64 and from Jim Armitage of the Evening Standard on page 66.

Appendix 2

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/709/new_restrictions_announced_to_drive_down_infection_ratedown_infection_rate

Published: Friday, 11th September 2020

New restrictions on meeting other people have been announced in order to push down the coronavirus rate of infection in Birmingham.

Update and clarification - 1953hrs on Friday 11 September 2020

To clarify the situation (as per the news story below), we have now agreed with Government that the household restrictions which will come into force next Tuesday will not affect the hospitality sector (bars restaurants and cafes).

Together with Government we will review this situation next week, when we assess the impact of the household restrictions.

Ian Ward - Birmingham City Council

Ian Courts - Solihull Council

Maria Crompton - Sandwell Council

Andy Street - WMCA

Original story from Tuesday 15 September

Birmingham residents will not be able to mix with any other households, indoors or in private gardens, except for those in a support bubble. This applies both inside and outside the city boundaries.

The rate of infection has increased to 75 per 100,000 compared to 30.1 per 100,000 for the period between the 8 to 14 August.

Cllr Ian Ward, leader of Birmingham City Council, said: "I know this is difficult, particularly when we have got used to seeing friends and family, but it is vital we stick to these rules and protect each other given the sudden rise in infection rate. If we all follow the rules we will get the infection rate down, but we have to work together on this. The virus has not gone away, it has not weakened, in fact it is relentless and we must be relentless in our efforts to control the spread.

"I understand that it may be frustrating that you can go to the pub but not see your family, but the data we have shows that the infection rate has risen mainly due to social interactions, particularly private household gatherings. In shops and hospitality venues there are strict measures in place to ensure they are Covid-safe, whereas it is much easier to inadvertently pass on the virus in someone's house where people are more relaxed and less vigilant.

"So people can still go out to shops and to restaurants and other venues that are open, but remember to be vigilant; if a venue doesn't look safe and you are not asked for your contact details, take your business elsewhere.

"Continue to wash your hands regularly and wear a face-covering in enclosed spaces and if you feel unwell, get a test."

To get a test, you can call NHS 119 or visit:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-and-tracing/get-a-test-to-check-if-you-have-coronavirus/>

Social contact restrictions

If you live in the affected area, in order to help prevent the spread of coronavirus you must not:

host people you do not live with in your home or garden, unless they're in your support bubble

meet people you do not live with in their home or garden, whether inside or outside of the affected area, unless they're in your support bubble

Your household is only the people you live with and any support bubble.

A support bubble is where a household with one adult joins with another household. Households within a bubble can still visit each other, stay overnight, and visit public places together.