

UK scientific excellence will get UK over the line in Covid marathon

If we ever needed a reminder that emerging from a pandemic would be a marathon rather than a sprint, recent events have made all too clear the challenges we face, *writes Sir Christopher Evans, chairman and CEO of Excalibur Healthcare Services.*

The excitement felt by people able to travel internationally again, go to restaurants, pubs, theatres and major sporting events is perfectly understandable. We all want life to be back to normal.

However, many people, quite understandably, still find the blizzard of regulations, rules, announcements and predictions baffling. Uncertainty abounds.

People naturally get worried when they see rising numbers of infections and hospitalisations, although thankfully deaths and very serious illness remain – at least for now – at relatively low levels.

It's reasonable to ask how we can possibly continue to return to normality in the face of substantial infection numbers without having to resort to the very bleak prospect of future restrictions or, even worse, lockdown.

I would argue there is good cause for optimism. The UK has been a world-leader in terms of vaccinations and there is compelling evidence that this has been our greatest weapon in reducing infections, serious illness and deaths.

The level of vaccine take up has been superb but there is still work to be done to convince those who have embraced the anti-vaxxer message.

There is overwhelming scientific evidence of vaccine safety and efficacy and , frankly, those who are refusing to get vaccinated are being selfish beyond belief, putting others and themselves at risk.

What an insult to the scientists who worked like Trojans to create life-saving vaccinations at unprecedented speed! Personally, I believe the proof of vaccination and COVID-19 health status that is now required for foreign travel is extremely sensible and some form of certification should be required domestically for larger scale events.

I believe most people would see that as a responsible approach. We are already seeing some anecdotal evidence that people who have not taken up a vaccination offer to date are more inclined to get one if they feel they may be denied access to events or places they may wish to go.

I'm glad to see that isolation rules have been changed for those who are fully vaccinated as society cannot function if it remains trapped in a 'pingdemic'.

Aside from vaccinations, what other tools do we have at our disposal? One major factor is that treatment of those who do end up in hospital due to Covid has advanced significantly since the early days of the pandemic. Drugs, particularly Dexamethasone, have made a real difference and there are more treatments in the pipeline.

One of my companies, Excalibur Medicines, was delighted to have arranged and structured a very significant clinical trial, the ARCADIA trial, of a potential therapy for people with diabetes who get COVID-19.

One in three of all deaths with COVID-19 in hospital in England have been associated with diabetes.

The trial was conducted by the biomedical research charity, St George Street Capital, and we are hugely encouraged by the trial data reported recently.

A further trial will be take place and hopefully the outcome will be a drug – a simple oral tablet – that will benefit diabetic patients who contract Covid-19. It is a very exciting prospect.

We are extremely grateful that a swathe of investors including Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, the Mubadala Sovereign Wealth Fund, the UK Government and Chlodwig Enterprises, an international ESG life sciences investment company, supported this important trial.

There is little doubt that as we move forward we will need other therapies at our disposal to combat Covid.

Testing will also remain a crucially important weapon in the fight against Covid. My company, [Excalibur Healthcare Services](#) has invested heavily in this area.

I'm proud to say we've created excellent laboratories in Cambridge staffed by highly qualified scientists who are processing thousands of COVID-19 tests a day, including those from students at Cambridge University.

Processing PCR tests at large scale for travel has been a challenge for all companies in this field given the time pressure people face having to time their tests to coincide with their travel arrangements.

PCR tests may not be required for as many foreign destinations in the near future but they remain the gold standard test for COVID-19 and aside from regulatory requirements we find people are looking for as much reassurance as possible.

As there will be a shift to lateral flow testing for returning to the UK, streamlining of that process is necessary. If people are required to have COVID-19 tests before they return to the UK, they are now having to attend facilities abroad close to the end of their holiday, book and pay for lateral flow tests. They should not need to.

At Excalibur we created our own technological solution, with Oxford-based technology partners Sensyne Health – an app which reads a lateral flow test more accurately than the human eye and within minutes have a test result emailed to the user on their mobile phone.

This type of innovation which takes away the hassle is what we need to embrace as we head towards better times. We want to be safe – and we can be – without being buried under a mountain of red tape.

A pandemic will, of course, be fast moving and we are now in yet another new phase. However, we can look forward with confidence and I am 100 per cent certain that the best of British science and technology will enable us to get over the finishing line of this marathon.