

20012 Mercy flight home to the UK from Wuhan could turn into a disaster

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Anyone who has studied public health emergencies knows that the only sensible strategy is to act from the very beginning according to the worst case scenario. Yet the Government's response so far to the escalating crisis over coronavirus is hardly instilling confidence.

One of Britain's leading experts in the field, Jonathan Ball, Professor of Molecular Virology at Nottingham University, warned yesterday that 'the rapidity of this outbreak is startling and certainly much more rapid than severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)', which is caused by another coronavirus and killed 700 people in the early 2000s.

Reports of this mysterious infection began to appear in the first week of January. But the moment ministers should have realised the seriousness of the problem came nine days ago when the WHO reported medical staff had become infected after treating patients. Healthy medical staff trained in managing infectious patients nevertheless succumbed to the symptoms.

Why wasn't the risk here upgraded then? With each day that passes, the public is increasingly worried. With the Foreign Office warning against all but essential travel to mainland China and British Airways cancelling all flights to and from China, it is no wonder.

Yet the reaction of ministers has seemed fragmented and illogical, guided more by politics, appearances and sound bites than by the pitiless logic required to tackle a virus. In nervous times like these, governments need to appear resolved, determined – and err on the side of caution. Their actions must be firm, decisive and logical because otherwise the public will see the flaws in their responses.

Call me cynical, but I suspect the UK rescue airlift announced yesterday owes more to stranded and desperate Britons telephoning in to BBC radio stations from Wuhan claiming to have been abandoned by the British Embassy than by any logical scientific thinking.

To give just one example of the inconsistency: on Tuesday medical staff in Birmingham were photographed dressed in full hazard body suits after a resident who had returned from China complained of feeling ill. Yet at the time those photographs were taken, Britons were still flying into London from China and being told to go home to 'self-isolate'. If the virus is sufficiently virulent and transmissible to force paramedics to suit up, how can it be safe for passengers who have visited a viral hotspot to fly home on a commercial jet, and return to their own towns and villages?

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