

# 21038      **Has Britain become too selfish to cope with coronavirus?**

Gaby Hinsliff, The Guardian, 28<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020

When death came to the village of Eyam, it was probably hidden inside a roll of cloth. Bubonic plague is thought to have been carried to this town from London back in the 1660s by infected fleas, trapped in a bale of fabric. The sickness spread fast, killing dozens of villagers and leaving many on the verge of fleeing in panic – but then something extraordinary happened.

The vicar of Eyam, believing it his duty to spare neighbouring towns from infection, persuaded his parishioners to take the astonishingly self-sacrificing step of sealing themselves off from the world. They would live or they would die, but nobody would leave until the sickness had burned itself out. One mother is said to have buried six of her children, yet by staying must have saved countless other women from the same fate.

It's impossible to read the story of Eyam without wondering who on earth would be capable of such selflessness now. When it came to the crunch, how many of us would secretly have more in common with the local lord, who fled after the first few deaths and left his neighbours to their fate? Compared with 17th-century peasants, modern Britons simply aren't enormously used to the idea of sacrifice for the supposed collective good.

So it's lucky for us, then, that Covid-19 is nothing like the Black Death. Where untreated, plague killed about half of its victims. This new virus seems to have a death rate of about 2%, and medicine has thankfully come a long way in 400 years.

But it's the elderly and infirm, people with existing lung conditions or suppressed immune systems, who may be most vulnerable, and it's them we are being asked to protect. Doing whatever is necessary to stop the virus spreading is, much like vaccinating your kids against measles, not just about protecting your own interests but putting the well-being of the herd first. The trouble is that we all know what has happened to vaccination levels across the west, as a minority of parents seemingly decided the herd was someone else's problem.

Are we really ready for a pandemic? Not so much for the virus itself as the personal sacrifices and inconveniences that might follow a serious outbreak: for lockdowns and school closures, empty streets and cancelled holidays, perhaps even factory shutdowns and shortages in the shops if there is serious disruption to global supply chains.

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