

# LOCKDOWN LEGACY

Were the Covid-19 lockdowns justified, or did they ultimately do more harm than good? Five years on from the first lockdown, two columnists who wrote for the *Sunday Independent* during the pandemic period offer contrasting views on the science that informed government decisions – and weigh up how prepared we are for another outbreak

## ‘This wasn’t science, it was the opposite – propaganda masquerading as science’

● Too many scientists wrongly labelled those who questioned the virus’s origin as conspiracy theorists



**Barry O'Halloran**

There is one word that will forever be associated with the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 – lockdown. It was described by Lord Sumption, a former British supreme court judge, as “without doubt the greatest interference with personal liberty in our history”. And yet, lockdown was much more than a grave infringement on our liberties. Five years on, we are still counting the costs of the litany of economic, social and psychological destruction it caused. So much so that many now wonder whether the cure was worse than the disease. How did we end up managing the pandemic with such a brutal, blunt

and destructive policy instrument as lockdown?

For a society that puts science and scientists on a pedestal, the uncomfortable answer is just that: science and scientists.

The virus that caused Covid-19 originated in China around November 2019. Few will forget the harrowing scenes there as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) implemented a draconian lockdown.

Determined to show the superiority of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, the CCP brooked no dissent. Armed police dragged people off the streets, welded doors shut and sealed off apartment blocks to stop the disease spreading.

Into this Chinese maelstrom came a group of World Health Organisation (WHO) scientists in mid-February. Their published report two weeks later had important conclusions: Covid-19 was a mild disease from which most people recover; the elderly, especially those over 80, were the most vulnerable; children were a low-risk group.

However, their most important conclusion was “China’s uncompromising and rigorous use of non-pharmaceutical measures [the lockdown] ... provides vital lessons for the global response.”

**COVID-19  
FIVE YEARS ON**



The WHO scientists’ endorsement of lockdown was clear.

“In the face of a previously unknown virus, China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history.”

With the WHO’s stamp of approval, lockdown became the default containment model for most countries.

If that didn’t seal the lockdown fate of the Western world, what happened next certainly did.

In February, television pictures from Italy were truly shocking. Hospitals swamped with seriously ill Covid patients, morgues overflowing, and army trucks drafted in to help shift the mounting pile of coffins.

Then, as panic gripped both public

and politicians, there was a scientific bombshell. In March, Imperial College London, in collaboration with the WHO, published modelling figures which showed that without lockdown up to 40 million people would die globally.

Neil Ferguson, the lead Imperial College modelling scientist, said lockdown would save over 400,000 lives in the UK and over two million in the US. He concluded: “There’s really no option but follow in China’s footsteps and suppress.”

**For scientific advisers everywhere,** lockdown was the only game in town. Even worse, lockdown became a one-size-fits-all plan, which ignored the key evidence from China.

Young people were least affected, yet schools were closed. The most vulnerable group, the elderly, received no special protection as wave after wave of Covid variants decimated care homes.

In June 2023, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) analysed over 20,000 disparate studies to answer the question: “Did lockdowns work?”

The conclusions were staggering. Lockdowns in Europe and the US only reduced Covid-19 mortality by 3.2pc.

“This translates into approximately 6,000 avoided deaths in Europe and 4,000 in the United States,” the IEA stated.

On average, 72,000 Europeans and 38,000 Americans die every year from the flu. So, the IEA report concluded that “lockdowns prevented relatively few deaths compared to a typical flu season”.

Aside from lockdown, the most egregious role that scientists played related to the origins of Covid-19.

On that critical issue, with huge implications for future infectious disease outbreaks, Western science caved in completely to the bullying insistence by the CCP that Covid-19 came from animals in the Wuhan wet market – and not from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Anyone who argued for the lab leak hypothesis over the wet market (as I did) was branded a “conspiracy theorist”.

That important debate was shut down in early March 2020 by the renowned medical journal *The Lancet*. It published a statement by a group of scientists whose stated purpose was “to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that Covid-19 does not have a natural origin”.

Other scientific publications followed suit, publishing statements and articles by well-known epidemiologists who condemned the lab-leak theory out of hand. And all this without evidence to back up their claims.

As subsequent leaks of numerous email exchanges showed, in private, many of these scientists believed the virus did come from a lab leak; in public, however, they argued the opposite. This

wasn’t science, it was the antithesis of science – it was propaganda masquerading as science.

Five years later, there is still no evidence that Covid-19 jumped from animals to humans – yet few scientists have seen fit to recognise this fact.

Meanwhile, as lab-leak evidence mounts, the public is more and more convinced that, contrary to the scientific “consensus”, Covid-19 came from a lab in Wuhan – as do many Western intelligence agencies.

The critical question now is will epidemiologists and scientific advisers act differently next time? I have my doubts. The reason for my scepticism? The evidence.

In October 2019, the Gates Foundation published a major epidemiological study covering over 100 countries to assess their pandemic preparedness. Those scientific establishments in each country charged with protecting their population from infectious disease outbreaks were asked how well prepared they were.

Needless to say, when asked to mark their own homework, the scientific guardians of public health gave themselves top marks. When the pandemic struck a few months later, however, the truth was revealed – they were unprepared.

Although I would love to be proven wrong, I see little evidence that anything has changed, despite all the trauma of the pandemic.

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