

**Health**

Secret planning exercise in 2016 modelled impact of Mers outbreak in UK

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Thu 10 Jun 2021 06.00 BST

The government ran an exercise modelling the impact of a coronavirus outbreak four years before the Covid-19 outbreak but tried to keep it secret, the Guardian has learned.

The previously unpublicised Exercise Alice took place in 2016 involving officials from Public **Health** England (PHE) and the Department of **Health** and Social Care (DHSC), and envisioned an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome (Mers), which is caused by a coronavirus.

It was one of 10 previously unpublicised pandemic planning exercises in the five years before Covid-19, now disclosed under freedom of information legislation. PHE had previously declined to reveal details of the exercises, citing the need to safeguard national security.

A leading virologist said Exercise Alice could have been “completely relevant” to the Covid response, which in the first weeks was shaped by flu pandemic plans.

Separately, a senior government adviser on respiratory disease described it as “odd” that details of the exercises had not been provided to key advisory committees.

Last October when the health secretary, Matt Hancock, published a report on Exercise Cygnus, a 2016 flu pandemic scenario, he told parliament: “Exercise Cygnus was not designed to consider other potential pandemics, or to identify what action could be taken to prevent widespread transmission.”

Moosa Qureshi, a hospital consultant who obtained the information, said MPs should ask the health secretary why he “failed to disclose to parliament that the government has modelled multiple other pandemics, including a coronavirus”.

Hancock faces cross-examination by MPs on Thursday who have already heard claims from the prime minister’s former chief adviser Dominic Cummings that assurances he received that pandemic planning was up to date were “completely hollow”.

As recently as March, PHE refused to name the exercises or say what they were about, but it released information when challenged in May by Qureshi.

Other exercises include three on Ebola, four on pandemic influenza, two on Lassa, an acute viral haemorrhagic illness, three on bird flu and one that dealt with a radiation incident, nicknamed Exercise Cerberus.

The public health body is now facing calls to publish the reports on the exercises and share them with experts.

“If there were so many exercises, it’s odd to me that the results were not provided to advisory committees,” said Prof Peter Openshaw, a respiratory physician and mucosal immunologist at Imperial College London who is a member of the government’s Nervtag committee, which advises on new and emerging respiratory virus threats. “I’m surprised not to have seen the results. Openness and disclosure has historically been associated with benefits rather than detriments.”

Openshaw said the reports on the exercises could be very valuable. He said Mers, like Covid, was caused by a coronavirus but the extent to which the exercise might have provided lessons for the current pandemic would depend on what assumptions were made about case fatality, route and speed of transmission, speed of diagnosis and the rate of asymptomatic infection.

Dr David Matthews, a reader in virology at Bristol University who studies coronaviruses, said the Mers exercise “would have been completely relevant” to the Covid-19 response. “If there was a Mers playbook, that should have been dusted off,” he said. “But who at PHE knew and how far was it shared among the

government? The question is what was done with this at the beginning of the pandemic.”

There is a passing [reference](#) to the Mers exercise in a 2018 NHS document which explains that it modelled a similar scenario to the outbreak in South Korea in 2015, when 35% of people who caught it required critical care and 38 people died. Matthews said Mers was less transmissible than Covid and more deadly, but an exercise probably would have thrown up useful lessons for Covid preparations. These included the lack of a vaccine, drug treatments and knowledge among clinicians about how to treat it.

Qureshi said: “The Mers exercise should have prepared us for a virus with a longer incubation period than flu, which can survive on contaminated surfaces much longer than flu, which requires high levels of protection for healthcare workers, and which couldn’t be vaccinated against before a second wave. This should have led to different strategies on PPE and quarantine from an influenza strategy.”

PHE referred questions about the exercise to the DHSC, which has been contacted for comment.
