



Social care is a neglected part of our health system, says **BARONESS ROS ALTMANN**

AT THE LAST moment the Government has backtracked on its sadly ill-conceived policy of forcing health and care workers to be vaccinated if they want to keep their jobs.

By **BARONESS ROS ALTMANN**

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Unfortunately, this U-turn has come too late for staff in our care homes. Those who refused to be vaccinated had to be dismissed. This has led to 40,000 care home workers leaving the jobs many of them loved, since the requirement for them to be double-jabbed was introduced last November.



COMMENT

Baroness Ros Altmann

The Government has backtracked on its mandatory vaccination policy (Image: SolStock/Getty)

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Of course, vaccination is important. It is the best way to protect against Covid and the vast majority of people were eager to be fully jabbed. But some are extremely nervous and need more time to be convinced.



People who are scared will often react negatively to being pressured or threatened, rather than persuaded.

This proved to be the case for some staff, as mandatory vaccination was imposed on care homes without proper preparation or support. All too often, social care seems to be the neglected part of our health system.

Care home operators, their staff and those vulnerable people whose lives depend on them are treated as of secondary importance.

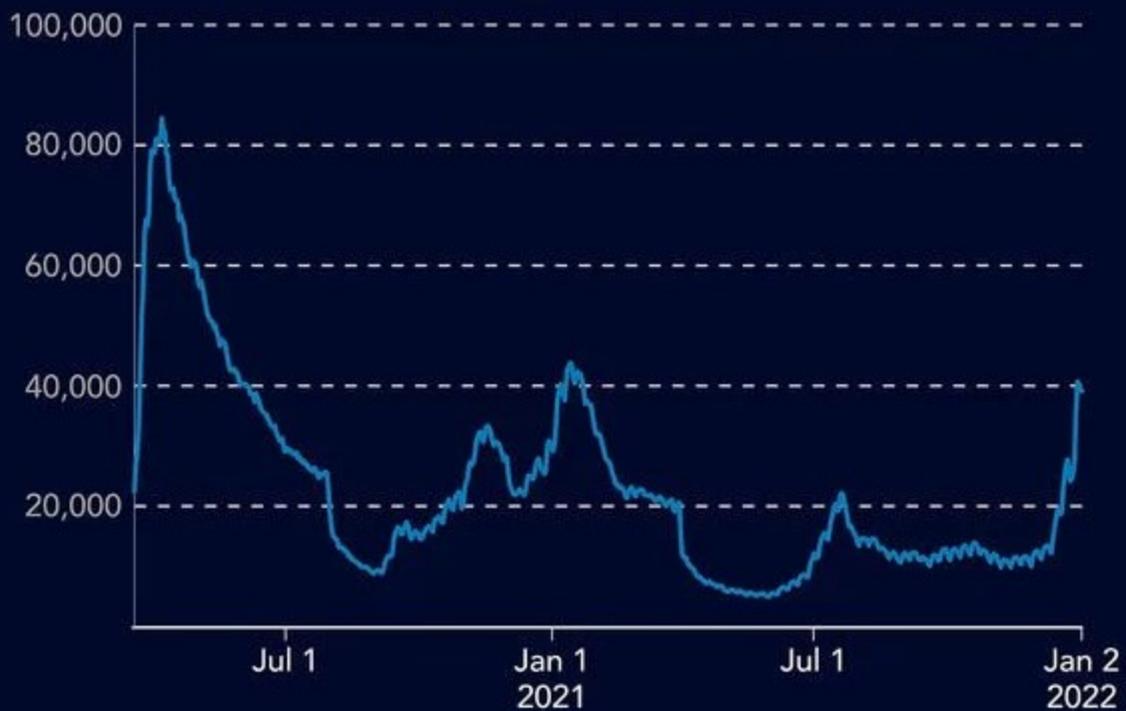


Despite widespread warnings of staff shortages, they were pushed to the bottom of the pile and valuable workers have lost their jobs.

Meanwhile, NHS and domiciliary care staff - for whom mandatory vaccination rules were only due to start from April 1 - have been spared by the policy reversal.

By imposing the policy only on care homes several months ahead of other parts of the health and care sector, this flawed policy decision actually worsened the social care crisis, despite the Prime Minister's promises to fix it.

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Of course vaccination can reduce the likelihood of catching Covid or becoming seriously ill, but it does not stop transmission altogether.

Therefore, ignoring the obvious impact on staffing levels seems a damaging own goal.

Instead of continuing to give workers more time to make their decision, the Government ploughed on, ignoring its own impact assessment showing the social care sector could lose 7.6 percent of its staff, and a House of Lords report warning it had not explained how the staff losses could be mitigated.

While still struggling with the fallout from Covid, care home operators, the workforce and residents must be wondering when they will receive the attention they deserve.

Lessons should have been learned from the dreadful decision, early in the pandemic, to force Covid patients out of hospitals into care homes, without ensuring they could be safely looked after.

This neglect of social care in favour of the NHS cost thousands of lives.

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It was well known that care homes were struggling to fill vacancies.

The sector has suffered a perfect storm, as council underfunding, low pay, poor working conditions and a lack of career structure have always meant high staff turnover.

The pandemic, coupled with new immigration rules blocking low-paid workers from entering Britain, have seen previous sources of staff supply dry up.

Even the Government's belated announcement of special visas for health and care staff will not help much, because many earn less than the minimum £20,000 salary requirement.

Care home job vacancies shot up between last May and December, while the number of applicants fell.

As pay for retail, hospitality and logistics workers rose sharply last year, people were attracted away from care into those sectors.

It is difficult to see how sacking workers in the middle of a staffing crisis would be in the best interests of vulnerable people's safety.

Far from protecting care home residents, by worsening the staffing crisis the Government has left more elderly citizens at risk.

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Nevertheless, the Government's retreat is a welcome reprieve. It has saved some NHS and domiciliary care jobs but, sadly, much damage has already been done.

By waiting until the very last moment (presumably in the hope of forcing more to be vaccinated) the whole fiasco has reduced the already-depleted workforce.

This creates greater difficulties as the NHS addresses backlogs which already affect six million people.