

ACTUARIES AND THE MEDIA IN THE PANDEMIC

BY **JOHN ROBERTS** AND **STUART MCDONALD**

Over the last two years the pandemic has resulted in epidemiologists, immunologists and modellers being thrust into the limelight to an extent that they might never have imagined. In the UK, actuaries too responded to the need for rapid, reliable and trustworthy analysis by harnessing social media in a way that previously had not been seen by the profession.

The COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group (ARG) was founded at the outset of the pandemic as part of the UK profession's response. Encouraged by Tan Suee Chieh, then President-elect of the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries (IFoA), the ARG's objective was to provide analyses and insight of the developing situation. In such a fast-moving crisis, agility has been key to delivering timely messaging. The speed of response needed has challenged traditional ways of actuarial working, with days (even hours) replacing the weeks and months that actuarial research (admittedly usually more complex) typically involves.

Whilst the ARG has a website ([covidactuaries.org](https://www.covidactuaries.org)) where original material is published, we quickly found Twitter to be the most effective communication channel. The ARG account ([@COVID19Actuary](https://twitter.com/COVID19Actuary)) and personal accounts of some members signpost useful information, provide insight, and respond to questions raised. Although personal accounts are used, members are representatives of the profession, and are careful to adhere to the IFoA 'Actuaries Code' – though interaction with people who deliberately set out to mislead sometimes tests our ethos to be polite and respectful with those we engage with!

There is a lot of misinformation regarding the pandemic on social media. An important aspect of the ARG's work has been addressing misinformation and explaining why it is wrong or misleading. We are regarded as a trusted and objective source of information, in line with the profession's reputation.

Interpretation of data published elsewhere has also been a key aspect of the work, examples being the UK's statistical body, the [Office for National Statistics](https://www.ons.gov.uk) (ONS), the [Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre](https://www.intensivecare.nhs.uk) (ICNARC) and the >

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Continuous Mortality Investigation (CMI).

The CMI is another great example of how the UK profession responded to the pandemic. Here the ARG has sought to bring the CMI's age-standardised mortality analysis to a much larger audience than normal, helping explain why this is a better basis for calculating excess mortality than simpler death counts. Developing that theme, Stuart has collaborated with the CMI to support Sky News who produced helpful analyses putting the mortality shock of the last two years into historical context for the public.

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One of the key benefits of Twitter has been the ability to engage with traditional media and politicians. Many media networks have journalists closely following our work, and behind the scenes Group members are often asked for advice. One recent example was the UK Prime Minister's announcement at 8pm on a Sunday night of an acceleration of the booster campaign. Just 30 minutes prior to the broadcast

we were asked by a BBC reporter to estimate the impact the announcement would have. We were able to respond, and the reporter used our figures on national TV immediately after the Prime Minister spoke.

Media appearances have become common, some of which have influenced government policy. John has been repeatedly interviewed by the BBC's flagship radio programme 'Today', which is closely listened to by politicians. And Stuart has been dubbed 'favourite actuary' of 'More or Less', a weekly statistics programme on which he has regularly appeared. Three members of the team have conducted live TV interviews (for BBC News and Newzroom Afrika), a nerve-wracking experience, hoping the home Wi-Fi doesn't lag at an inopportune moment, and the family pet doesn't make a bid for stardom.

Political influence has extended beyond media interviews though. At the start of the vaccine rollout our analysis confirming that the priority ordering was optimal in terms of reducing deaths was widely quoted by the UK Government, including the Prime Minister. IFoA volunteers, including members of the ARG, have also supported the UK Government's scientific advisory group (SAGE), most notably in modelling the impact of an overwhelmed health system on mortality rates. >

One of our regular outputs is the **'Friday Report'**, a bi-weekly compendium of news, data, and links to research papers. This is promoted on both **Twitter** and **LinkedIn**, the other social media network used by the ARG.

Whilst the ARG has a UK focus, we have greatly benefited from a member based in South Africa, particularly helpful at the start of the Omicron wave. We have also commissioned international articles where they form a useful contrast to the UK position. Nevertheless, we would benefit from a wider international perspective, and would welcome any approaches in that regard.

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One side effect of the ARG's work has been to raise the profile of the actuarial profession in the UK, both with the public and with politicians, including those in government. As we move beyond the acute phase of the crisis, the profession should consider whether some of the innovative ways that the Group has operated can be useful elsewhere. This might include the agility with which the ARG operates, or the ways it has engaged with the public.

Whilst the pandemic has offered a unique opportunity to showcase the skillsets of actuaries, other topics, such as future pension and social care provision, and climate change, will be of great, if not such urgent, relevance to the population. Actuaries are ideally placed to inform these debates in the future. <



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