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Use of fear to control behaviour in Covid crisis was ‘totalitarian’, admit scientists

Members of Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviour express regret about ‘unethical’ methods

By Gordon Rayner, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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Scientists on a committee that encouraged the use of fear to control people’s behaviour during the Covid pandemic have admitted its work was “unethical” and “totalitarian”.

Members of the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviour ([SPI-B](#)) expressed regret about the tactics in a new book about the role of psychology in the Government’s Covid-19 response.

SPI-B warned in March last year that ministers needed to increase “the perceived level of personal threat” from Covid-19 because “a substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened”.

Gavin Morgan, a psychologist on the team, said: “Clearly, using fear as a means of control is not ethical. Using fear smacks of totalitarianism. It’s not an ethical stance for any modern government. By nature I am an optimistic person, but all this has given me a more pessimistic view of people.”

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Mr Morgan spoke to author Laura Dodsworth, who has spent a year investigating the Government’s tactics for her book A State of Fear, published on Monday.

Ministers have faced repeated accusations that they [ramped up the threat from the pandemic](#) to justify lockdowns and coerce the public into abiding by them – a claim that will be examined by the [forthcoming public inquiry](#) into the pandemic response.

Ministers have been accused of ramping up the threat from the pandemic to justify lockdowns | CREDIT: Andrew Matthews/PA

SPI-B is one of the sub-committees that advises the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), led by Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser.

One SPI-B scientist told Ms Dodsworth: “In March [2020] the Government was very worried about compliance and they thought people wouldn’t want to be locked down. There were discussions about fear being needed to encourage compliance, and decisions were made about how to ramp up the fear. The way we have used fear is dystopian.

“The use of fear has definitely been ethically questionable. It’s been like a weird experiment. Ultimately, it backfired because people became too scared.”

Another SPI-B member said: “You could call psychology ‘mind control’. That’s what we do... clearly we try and go about it in a positive way, but it has been used nefariously in the past.”

One warned that “people use the pandemic to grab power and drive through things that wouldn’t happen otherwise... We have to be very careful about the authoritarianism that is creeping in”.

Another said: “Without [a vaccine](#), psychology is your main weapon... Psychology has had a really good epidemic, actually.”

As well as overt warnings about the danger of the virus, the Government has been accused of feeding the public a non-stop diet of bad news, such as deaths and hospitalisations, without ever putting the figures in context with news of how many people have recovered, or whether daily death tolls are above or below seasonal averages.

Another member of SPI-B said they were "stunned by the weaponisation of behavioural psychology" during the pandemic, and that “psychologists didn’t seem to notice when it stopped

being altruistic and became manipulative. They have too much power and it intoxicates them”.

Steve Baker, the deputy chairman of the Covid Recovery Group of Tory MPs, said: “If it is true that the state took the decision to terrify the public to get compliance with rules, that raises extremely serious questions about the type of society we want to become.

“If we’re being really honest, do I fear that Government policy today is playing into the roots of totalitarianism? Yes, of course it is.”

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