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Covid-19: Should the UK mandate more stringent workplace protection for older people?

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The importance of ensuring the United Kingdom's national economy is kept functioning during the covid-19 pandemic has been heavily emphasised.¹² Paid employment is a key factor in any economy, and the fact that some of the UK's working population are aged 65 or over³ merits attention.

Why? Spiegelhalter recently clarified that as age advances the risk of death with covid-19 infection increases markedly,⁴ which is reflected in the United States' experience that 80% of its reported covid-19 related deaths "have been among people aged 65 years or over."⁵ For an older person, a positive covid-19 viral test result is not merely a signal to isolate but also a potential disaster because once infected the risk of dying is significantly greater than that of a younger person. When it comes to covid-19, the old maxim "prevention is better than cure" might be lifesaving for older people.

How important are people over 65 to the paid workforce? In late 2019, men and women over 65 in employment numbered approximately 1 326 000 (798 000 aged 65-69 and 528 000 aged over 70), representing 4% of the total paid workforce.³ Older people clearly contribute substantially to the economy.

Ensuring older people's ability to keep working is extremely important. But continuing workplace engagement can be associated with increased covid-19 related risk. Problems that might occur either in the workplace or during the journey to and from work include difficulties maintaining safe social distancing and ensuring consistent mask or visor wearing by others.

Can the risks be minimised? An "age stratified" approach to risk in the workplace might be considered. Could home based working become the universal norm for older people?

Nobel laureate Thomas Mann said, "Everything is politics." The challenge for our politicians is to find a workable formula that keeps the country's economy functioning while minimising the personal risks of catching covid-19 for those most at risk of dying if they become infected.¹

Footnotes

Competing interests: None declared.