

GENERAL MEETING

Via Zoom on Monday 10th August 2020 at 7.30pm

(Secretary's note: due to initial technical difficulties, it was not possible to follow the agenda as originally set out. These minutes reflect the order as stated in the agenda. The session was also recorded and a video will be made available on line in the near future.)

Present: David Silver (Chair), Tom Evans Vice-Chair), Nick Hawkins (Secretary), David Cargill (Treasurer), Eric Blackwell, Allan Cook, Bob Roberts, Richard Wales, Cllrs Clive Morgan & David Suthers, and 27 members.

Apologies: Ian Thomas, Cllr Rod McKerlich, Rev'd Vicki Burrows, Geoff Barton-Greenwood, Mike Clarke, Moy Lewis, Gerry McNamara

Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, which was being held electronically for the first time due to the COVID Pandemic.

Ron Eccles: 'COVID-19 - the great pandemic, questions and answers'.

The Chairman introduced Emeritus Professor Ron Eccles. Ron was the Director of the Common Cold Centre at Cardiff University 1988-2017 and is thus a specialist on viral matters.

Ron started his talk by denying that he was an expert. He pointed out that over 5K COVID-related articles are being published every week in technical journals. It is impossible for anyone to say they fully understand what is going on.

He explained what a virus is. Every living thing is 'infected' by viruses. Several thousand human viruses have been identified, and there are many more in domestic animals. He showed the basic structure of a virus and said 'the receptor' is the key part in transmission. Successful viruses 'go for' the common receptors in human cells, where they are parasitic. (This is the difference between a virus and bacteria, so antibiotics do not work.) Viruses are also incredibly small, being just 100nm in diameter (10K of them would fit end-to-end in 1mm). They enter the body mainly through airways and the eyes (which is why goggles are important in many circumstances), sometimes being transferred from surfaces by touching them and then the eye or nose. Everyone is constantly exposed to viruses - you would need to be a total hermit to avoid them. So, to minimise the chance of being infected by the COVID virus, social distancing and hand washing is the only practical avoidance regime.

Why is COVID-19 so different and so dangerous? Simply because it is different and the human species has not come across it. Evidence implicates the Chinese Horseshoe Bat which infected a Pangolin which was then sold (illegally) in the market in Wuhan. Previous potentially pandemic viruses - SARS 2003, which came from a Civet Cat in China, and MERS 2012, which came from a Dromedary Camel in Saudi Arabia - did not develop in the same way. COVID-19 is dangerous because we have no natural immunity, it spreads easily, it infects the lungs (and also other organs like the heart and kidneys) and, for many people (notably children and young adults), it causes only mild symptoms so people do not know they have got it. But the danger must not be overstated. As at 7th August, COVID-19 was registered as having caused 712K deaths worldwide. In 1918, Spanish flu killed 20-50M. And normal flu generally kills 650K worldwide in a year. People are also dying from other causes. For the elderly, dementia is the highest killer.

Ron pointed out that, perhaps strangely, COVID-19 does little damage itself. It is the body's auto-immune response that is the problem, plus fibrosis of the lungs. Treatment, for those who need it, is reasonably well documented - provision of oxygen, placing on a ventilator (although that can damage the lungs) and Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP). Some antiviral drugs help (such as those used for Ebola), steroids can dampen the immune system, Interferon has been used but drugs like Chloroquine (as promoted by Donald Trump) are not very effective and can have side effects.

Where is COVID-19 going? Everywhere! There is nowhere in the world where people are immune. Even in places (like New Zealand) where it would appear things are in control, the population remains susceptible and no amount of border controls etc will keep it out permanently. The great hope is a vaccine. There are currently over 90 trials being conducted and Ron said he was 'pretty

confident' some will be effective. He suggested that late 2020 or spring 2021 was a sensible date for their introduction. The impact of the virus itself is likely to decline over time. There are already dozens of different strains of COVID-19 (a problem in itself) and some evidence that it is causing milder infections. However, COVID-19 will not be eliminated in the same way as smallpox has been.

What was his personal opinion of what had gone on? He thought China had been far too slow and secretive in their early dealings (virologists in Wuhan were researching SARS in 2016) and the WHO too slow in taking control. In the UK, lockdown was far too late (notably allowing Cheltenham races and football matches to take place) so hot spots had already been introduced country-wide before action was taken. It was also shameful that elderly people in hospital were sent back to Care Homes without being tested. 'Trace & track' methodology has been pitiful. He would not have shut the schools as all the evidence shows that children are picking up the virus from adults, and not from each other.

He summed up his talk by re-stating that COVID-19 is here to stay, like it or not, but will eventually simply become one of the 'family of viruses' that infect our bodies.

There were a number of questions at the end of Ron's talk. What should the Association be planning regarding events such as Christmas lighting and the May Festival? Impossible to say. Crowds gathering in December are unlikely to be allowed but things may well be better by spring 2021 (but Governments are bound to be naturally cautious). Is antibody testing worthwhile? Not good news. Research in China shows that antibodies seem to decline after a few months, leaving the body susceptible to re-infection, but genetic variations appear to be a significant factor. This is not good news for vaccines, which will have to be 'very clever' to provide on-going immunity or have to be renewed regularly. How long does the virus last in the open air? This has been somewhat overblown in the media - hard surfaces will normally self-sterilise within 24 hours and the virus can survive 4-6 hours maximum in the air. When will it all be over? Ron said that, in Wales, cases were down to 12 a day in a population of around 3M. The risk is actually very low, but older people will have to wait for a vaccine before being confident of being safe. The virus will become milder over time but it might be a decade before everyone can relax fully. What about the impact of flu come the autumn; will social distancing etc reduce it? Yes - and also the common cold. Evidence shows that people have been less infected by colds over the last few months because of the way we have been living, and this is likely to continue - providing that people continue to live the same way. Will they keep that up, though? What about the impact of Public Health services? These services had remained centralised in Wales and Scotland, but had been devolved to local authorities in England where some of the budget had been reallocated. This was probably one reason why control over the virus in England has been poorer than the other two countries.

At the close of the talk, the Chairman thanked Ron for such a detailed and informative talk. He hoped everyone now felt they understood the situation better and had also been reassured. He said (over the Zoom link) that he had a token of the Association's appreciation to pass to Ron as soon as possible - and Ron commented that alcohol is one of the best anti-viral agents....

Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer reported that the Association's accounts at the end of July showed a balance of £6338 - slightly down from the beginning of the year. Money held in a restricted fund for Tenovus Cancer Care (arising from Christmas activities) had recently been passed to them. Festival sponsorship money was still awaited from both Plasdŵr and Redrow. If that was forthcoming, then further funding would be passed to Tenovus.

There were no questions.

Future Plans

The Chairman said that, as mentioned in the very recent Radyr Chain, the Association was planning a 'mini-autumn festival', starting on 18th September. Events in the pipeline included a Tenovus Quiz, a 'Junk Challenge', an activity trail (treasure hunt), a photo competition, a local walk, a reappearance of Mickey and Mini Mouse, a cookery demonstration and, possibly, an 'amusing video' competition. Full details would be sent out soon. He also highlighted the annual Tenovus fundraising walk which was scheduled for 13th September, starting and ending in Park Road. Details were in Radyr Chain.

Any other business

Nothing raised.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Monday, 5th October, probably conducted via Zoom. Details of the speaker would be announced soon.