

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes Network - the contribution No. 26

Country: **UK England**

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Although the wearing of face masks in public is a common practice amongst citizens in Asia to prevent the spread of airborne viruses, there is no particular tradition of doing so in the UK. However, when COVID-19 cases emerged here in late Feb/early March, available stocks in shops sold out very quickly – alongside hand sanitisers and anti-bacterial handwash. During the pandemic the wearing of clinical grade masks and protective equipment is standard in health and social care settings; and there are now steps to encourage the general population to wear non medical grade ones.

The UK governmental response is complicated by the fact that the nations with devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) can produce their own guidance. So when UK prime minister Boris Johnson announced that people should wear face masks or face coverings in some shops and on public transport on May 11th 2020 he was effectively making a recommendation for England alone. Part of the rationale for this recommendation was that people would be more “confident” to return to work, which Johnson also wanted to promote, if mask wearing was more widespread. The first minister of Scotland had recommended the wearing of face masks/coverings on buses, trains and in shops on April 28th 2020, people in Northern Ireland had been advised to wear them on public transport on May 8th and as of May 14th the Welsh government has not advised they are worn.

In all cases the wearing of face masks or coverings is advised but not compulsory. Nevertheless, it is now a common sight to see people in face masks when out in public. Supplies can mostly be found in pharmacies and small shops rather than supermarkets and many people are making their own. News and lifestyle websites frequently post articles with instructions on how to make a face mask from an old t-shirt or other material.

Amongst the overall population there seems to be a great deal of posting on social media and forums spreading messages about i) face masks being worn to protect others – and therefore being a communal practice/responsibility and ii) advice about how to wear them - as they are

mostly unfamiliar in the UK many people do not realise, for instance, that they should cover the nose as well as mouth.

There is some recognition in media and public discourse of the lack of a solid evidence base to support the use of face masks to prevent the spread of a droplet borne coronavirus. The issue has also received academic attention. The Centre for Evidence Based Medicine in Oxford concluded from a literature review that policymakers should encourage the public to wear face masks (Greenhalgh et al BMJ 2020;369) on the basis of the precautionary principle. This prompted a response from social scientists Martin et al, (BMJ; 369) stating that wearing masks in public would likely have undesirable unintended consequences, and that more caution should be taken before promoting a policy change. A BMJ and social media debate ensued about whether the advice to the public to wear masks is justified, or an (other) example of simplified conclusions from complex and contested evidence, and whether ‘eminence’ was being privileged above ‘evidence’.

Personally I (HW) believe that face mask use in the UK will grow but not become universal – unless it is mandated by law. Currently well below 50% of the people I see when outside are wearing them. Some people avoid them as they find them uncomfortable and others do not see them as necessary, or remove them in order to talk to others they see outdoors. In my personal opinion I am very cautious over their use due to the lack of evidence base plus concerns over how face masks are used by the public. Face masks create a warm, moist environment which becomes a collection point for bacteria and viruses - they can therefore be a substantial health hazard for the wearer. Many people do not realise that they should dispose of a commercially bought face mask after one use and that home-made face masks should be boiled or disinfected after each use. Even when they are aware of this, there is a high financial or time cost involved, meaning that many people are likely to reuse their face masks and thereby increase the hazard.

I believe the benefits of face masks may be overestimated and lead us into a false sense of security in which we take unwarranted risks – such as touching more objects and neglecting handwashing, or going outside when suffering from a cough or cold. Therefore, my preference would be to give greater attention to other steps such as providing screens and visors for workers in public facing roles and reinforcing protective mechanisms around social distancing.