

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes Network - the contribution No. 27

Country: **UK SCOTLAND**

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On the subject of face-masks both the devolved Scottish Government and the UK Government claim to follow the scientific evidence, which so far points to some limited benefits in reducing the transmission of “droplets” if used by the general public in settings where social distancing is impossible to achieve. In addition, it is widely believed that the government policy (in Scotland and UK) is also trying to limit the demand for medical-grade facemasks, to enable most of these resources to be directed towards the health and (belatedly) social care workers.

The Scottish Government provided detailed advice on 28th of April that “face coverings” “may be of some benefit” if used by the public when in closed spaces, in particular on public transport and in shops. As per above, critical details published alongside this guidance are that a) “face covering” is defined as “facial covering of the mouth and nose, that is made of cloth or other textiles and through which you can breathe, for example a scarf” – i.e. not a medical-grade facemask - and b) limited scientific evidence as to the benefits and the danger of substituting face covering for strict adherence to social distancing and isolation rules. Interestingly, politicians and public figures (Scottish and UK) are almost never seen wearing a face covering or mask.

Personally, I do use an impromptu cloth face covering when shopping (and have done so even prior to Government advice). It is a slightly thicker scarf, but with good coverage of my mouth and nose and I handle it carefully and wash after every use. I was prompted to do so, by the relatively crowded shops in the first phase of the Covid-19 lockdown and the somewhat inconsiderate shoppers (who seemed not to make any effort to maintain social distancing). I believe that due to the extraordinariness of wearing face coverings in public spaces in Scotland, these do not encourage an undue feeling of “safety” by their use, rather the reverse. Hence, with full awareness that the evidence for being protected by this measure is not there, rather, I hope that by wearing a face covering, I may remind (or even deter) others from breaking social distancing rules.

In general, there seems to be a relatively wide acceptance of government recommendations, but a very patchy uptake. Though the Scottish Government advice is trusted more than that from the UK Government¹, significant generational and cultural differences can be seen as to its implementation. To begin with, a general impression is that younger people, who are out and about more due to essential work and higher uptake of exercise, are more likely to wear face coverings than the older population. Many workers who come in closer contact with a higher number of people (either through travel or being key workers) wear more “designer” types of face coverings that resemble masks by their shape, but are made of cloth, and which are available for purchase on-line. In addition, in a multi-cultural society such as Scotland, there are some subtle differences between people from different cultural backgrounds and traditions who are either more accustomed to follow stricter government instructions, or from cultures where facemask wearing is more commonplace. This group, however, tends to disregard the details of the advice on the locus and type of masks to use – they often wear them in open spaces, too, and mainly use disposable surgical or dust masks.

¹ In Scotland, media reports of recommendation and guidelines are often confusing to the general public. The reason being that the devolved Scottish Government has a full complement of officials and representatives mirroring the UK Government, but issuing different (sometimes nuanced, sometimes divergent) advice. Combine this with the advisory nature of most public health recommendations in the UK (apart from the lockdown itself), and the confusion is there. However, as the increasingly predominant view of many Scotland’s residents is that the UK Government lacks competence and authority (this has been building over many years and has been exacerbated by Brexit and Covid-19 crises), the public views the Scottish Government’s advice more seriously and broadly welcomes its more cautious approach in comparison to the Westminster. There is also an impression (supported by a careful media campaign) that the Scottish Government is having a frank and direct dialogue with its citizens, bearing more of the scientific evidence to the public and having more detailed advice published.