

Book

A global view of the pandemic: the good, bad, and ugly



There will come a day when we ask “Do we really need another book about the pandemic?” But this, as the movie meme goes, is not that day. We have as yet barely begun to process what we have been living through since the start of 2020—and that “we” implies no universality, since COVID-19 has exposed some of the deepest and most problematic divisions in societies, at the national and global scales. There are so many stories that need to be told: of bravery, resilience, care, and kindness as well as corruption, incompetence, and venality, of ingenious as well as mistaken science, of leadership and its absence. Devi Sridhar’s new book *Preventable: How a Pandemic Changed the World & How to Stop the Next One* covers an impressive amount of that ground, and has wise words about what we might try to do better next time. It also reveals how hard it is to weave all the strands together, and why no single account is going to give us all of the bigger picture; why, indeed, we do not even know yet what that looks like.

One of the strengths of the book is its global perspective. It is no secret now that some small and less wealthy countries and regions mounted a far better response than did many better-resourced western nations. Sridhar, Professor of Global Public Health at the University of Edinburgh in the UK, explains for example how the Indian state of Kerala rejected Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s disastrous complacency by placing the state on high alert from January, 2020 and implemented rigorous contact tracing and testing. She provides astute comparisons of contrasting strategies, from New Zealand’s Zero COVID-19 (now being severely tested by the omicron variant) approach to Sweden’s ill-fated gamble to let SARS-CoV-2 flow through the population. The book offers the best accessible summary to date of the various strategies adopted

globally, from the Czech Republic to Taiwan, South Africa, and the grim tale of Brazil, where President Jair Bolsonaro sadly surprised no one with his science-denying macho posturing.

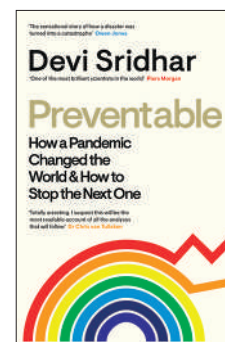
“Sridhar’s central message is well worth heeding: ‘COVID-19 put into stark relief how global politics shape our health.’ No pandemic response is likely to be equable and fair unless society is.”

It was never likely that a one-size-fits-all COVID-19 response would work internationally, but some of the mistakes, not to mention the misdemeanours, of high-income countries have been astonishing. “No one could have anticipated that the US and UK, consistently ranked by pandemic preparedness indices as the top-two countries for capacity and readiness, would suffer as badly as they did”, Sridhar writes. The “poor leadership” of former US President Donald Trump and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was surely a contributing factor to that. But, as Sridhar relates, they and other leaders also made the mistake of imagining there was a trade-off between the health of people and the health of the economy, even though some experts warned at the outset that this was a false dichotomy—and have been proved right.

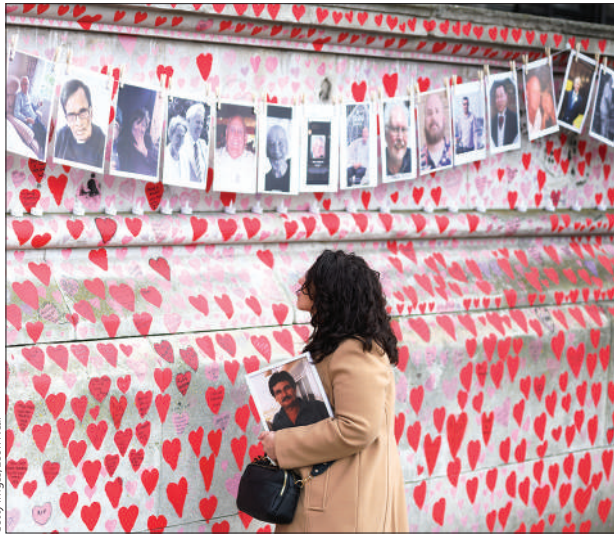
There were also some serious scientific failures, partly owing to hubris. Sridhar mounts a strong critique of the UK’s response, especially in England; as an adviser to the Scottish Government she was one of those who helped shape a more cautious and considered strategy there. The inadequacies of Johnson’s responses have been rather comprehensively enumerated previously in *Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain’s Battle with Coronavirus* by journalists George Arbuthnott

and Jonathan Calvert, and *Spike: the Virus vs the People—the Inside Story* by Jeremy Farrar, Director of the Wellcome Trust and a member of the UK Government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and science journalist Anjana Ahuja. Sridhar, however, points also to shortcomings in the approach followed by SAGE, which initially amounted to what David Halpern, Chief Executive of the UK Government’s Behavioural Insights Team, described as herd immunity plus shielding of the vulnerable. This description now looks uncomfortably close to the proposal advocated by the proponents of the wayward Great Barrington Declaration. It was never clear that this strategy was a viable alternative to a lockdown. For one thing, Sridhar explains, we still do not know who the “vulnerable” really are, beyond the obvious age-related and comorbidity-related increase in risk. Does it include people with obesity or diabetes? Nor do we know how to shield them effectively, given that most transmission happens in families. “How exactly are elderly and vulnerable members supposed to isolate from their own families?”, Sridhar asks—“the most vulnerable rely on others for assistance”. And in March, 2020 we knew nothing about immunity: whether, for instance, infection conferred immunity for a lengthy time afterwards. The original plan supported by SAGE was, then, bafflingly unrealistic and misguided, as the group itself belatedly realised. It tried to be too clever by half, imagining that we could somehow turn infections up or down like a tap even while the country did not have any meaningful testing infrastructure to track them. At the time, chief scientists said wide-scale public testing was unnecessary, but the truth was that it was simply unavailable.

By contrast, countries such as Ghana and Vietnam that could afford no such fantasies of control given their fragile



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Getty Images/Leon Neal

public health systems opted instead to try to arrest infection at the outset. There is still little acknowledgment from SAGE scientists that the UK COVID-19 response suffered from a strange mixture of overconfidence and fatalism, along with a tendency to treat the pandemic as if it were navigable with sufficiently ingenious models and public health policies, rather than heeding the advice of Mike Ryan of WHO in early March, 2020: “Be fast, have no regrets.”

Given all these missteps, Sridhar has surprisingly little to say about how to improve the scientific advisory process. She says that populist leaders such as Johnson and Trump “sought and found scientists who were willing to tell them what they wanted to hear, rather than listen to the scientists providing a realistic picture of the crisis and the steps needed to solve it”, but it is not clear who (particularly for the UK) she is placing in each of those camps. Perhaps Sridhar’s relatively positive experience of advising the Scottish Parliament has left her with fewer misgivings about the process, but the pandemic has surely challenged some conventional notions of how science advice should feed into policy, not only in the UK but also worldwide. Does the duty of scientific advisers lie primarily with their political leaders or the public, and what do they do when those two obligations conflict?

Should their advice always be devoid of policy recommendations? Is it ever really “apolitical”?

Since Sridhar’s book was completed in August, 2021, the picture presented in *Preventable* feels like a somewhat truncated history that speaks of “healing and recovery” and preparing for the next pandemic even when we now know that omicron was lying in store, a reminder of the potential for future SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern. For the UK Government in early May, 2022, the full removal of all COVID-19 protections and the cessation of regular SAGE meetings reveals a determination to declare the pandemic over and move on that might yet prove premature and neglects the ongoing dangers of long COVID. With parts of China under strict lockdown and a soaring death toll in Hong Kong, there is at least another chapter in the writing (and which is sketched, perhaps, in the book’s afterword added to address omicron and the developments until January, 2022): one that underlines, among other things, the vital importance of having an effective vaccine programme and of maintaining surveillance capabilities.

In narrative terms *Preventable* is a little uneven in places, albeit perhaps rather unavoidably so. In trying to present a global view, Sridhar has to keep jumping back and forth in time: one moment we are being told about the blood-clotting alarm over the Oxford–AstraZeneca vaccine, the next we are back in the UK’s “herd immunity” days of March, 2020. Perhaps the disjointed story reflects the disorienting nature of the whole crisis: what fits where, and how to find the wider perspective? The “lab leak” hypothesis of the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the travails of long COVID, the disruption of children’s education, vaccine nationalism, the misinformation infodemic, the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 variants: they are all in here, but it is a bumpy ride.

This breadth of material is interspersed with Sridhar’s digressions about living in Scotland and the travails

of social media trolling, which at times makes it unclear if the book is intended as an objective account or a personal journey. Occasionally people (including, slightly oddly, the author herself) are quoted without much account of the context or implications.

But Sridhar’s central message is well worth heeding: “COVID-19 put into stark relief how global politics shape our health.” No pandemic response is likely to be equitable and fair unless society is. *Preventable* concludes with five lessons for how we might do better when, as seems inevitable, we face the next pandemic. We need a global surveillance system to identify new risks of zoonotic viruses, and the resources to sequence new viruses. Here the UK really has had an exemplary system that has been vital for identifying and tracking variants—which, however, it is now in the process of disbanding. Countries need to develop their own vaccine manufacturing capability, so that low-income countries are not dependent on the goodwill of high-income countries, which have not always displayed a sense of global solidarity. Given the risk of a lethal influenza pandemic, we should redouble efforts to make universal influenza vaccines. But at the same time, we need to re-examine the pandemic playbook so that it is not geared to an influenza-like virus. In other words, Sridhar says, it is time for governments to support the basic and applied science needed to avoid a repeat run.

This is surely true, but it does not quite get to grips with the wider issue that *Preventable* identifies with clarity: we can never “science our way” out of problems with sociopolitical roots. Another pandemic is not preventable until we are willing and able to elect competent and humane leaders and begin to address the grotesque inequalities and injustices within and between societies.

Philip Ball

Philip Ball’s latest book is *The Book of Minds* that will be published by Picador in June, 2022.