

Section B: Local Stories

Local issues are global issues. They remind us of geographic variation: the virus does not fall evenly. This section examines some local issues from York that address national and global issues.

Conversations with a Corona or Coronavirus – A Report from the Coroner’s Chair

The following report is completely fictional. It is based upon a conversation on 18th April with “Chris the Coroner” (“CC”, a pseudonym), who is a practising coroner

JB: It’s interesting how statistics has become central in the everyday discourse, and I understand this has led you to have some concerns?”

CC: “Yes. I go into court twice a week and recently I’ve been concerned about the large number of COVID-19 related deaths. I noticed that the number coming to me did not seem to tally with the national numbers that were being reported. It’s only recently that the government have come clean that their numbers relate to hospital deaths only. They ignore deaths outside hospital, and some of these come to me.

“COVID-19 is a notifiable disease and I’ve recently been getting about 6 per day. If I scale that up nationwide it comes to something like 800 deaths coming to coroners every day. And that only includes those outside hospital that are coming to coroners. This suggests to me that the published data undercounts by possibly up to 100%. That’s worrying but in a sense it might not matter too much if we’re interested in the rate of trend rather than the absolute number.”

JB: “That’s interesting because I think I’ve been estimating an under count of perhaps 20-50%. Your estimate is much larger than that. However, the degree of undercount probably changes over time, so it’s not clear that trends in hospital deaths necessarily give you accurate estimates of trends in the total, as ratios change over time.”

CC: “Well it does appear that the proportion of deaths in care homes is increasing. Care homes might be a bit behind the curve compared with hospitals. And the timelags are different.

JB: “One of the big memes in Radical Statistics is “Statistics as a social product”: to understand the data we must know how it was produced. Data are *produced* not discovered. Can you tell me where your data comes from i.e. how is it produced?”

CC: “I get my reports straight from the GP, and sometimes from the Registrar’s Office. It’s not all that clear really. Sometimes I might get the same death twice. And sometimes not at all. Generally, the ones that come to me relate to people who have not seen a doctor prior to their death. That’s why hospital deaths come to me only if there are other suspicious circumstances. That has never occurred yet with Coronavirus deaths, so all of them are recorded as “due to natural causes”.”

JB: Is this something that has been discussed by other coroners. Is the Society of Coroners involved in this? I could not see anything about it on the Society website”

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CC: But legislation has changed and Coronavirus is now a notifiable disease.

JB: “Thank you Chris.”