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State of fear: how ministers 'used covert tactics' to keep scared public at home

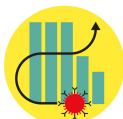
Government's 'psychological strategies' to manipulate unwitting public's behaviour may backfire and lead to long-term damage, experts claim

By Gordon Rayner, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

2 April 2021 • 8:43pm



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Failures in the UK's pandemic response are not hard to identify, but on one front the Government's success is undeniable: persuading a fearful nation to stay [locked indoors for much of the past year](#).

The daily diet of statistics on deaths, hospitalisations and Covid cases has been so effective that compliance with lockdown has [gone far beyond what ministers expected](#).

But the problem with fear, as one behavioural scientist said on Friday, is that “you can't turn it on and off like a tap”.

As the country prepares for the complete end of lockdown in June, there are far-reaching questions about how many people will return to the workplace, or to normality, and the consequences of that for the economy and for physical and [mental health](#).



Boris Johnson pounds home the stay at home message at a Downing Street press conference

Whether frightening the public was a deliberate – or honest – tactic has become the subject of intense debate, and dozens of psychologists have now accused ministers of using “covert psychological strategies” to manipulate the public's behaviour.

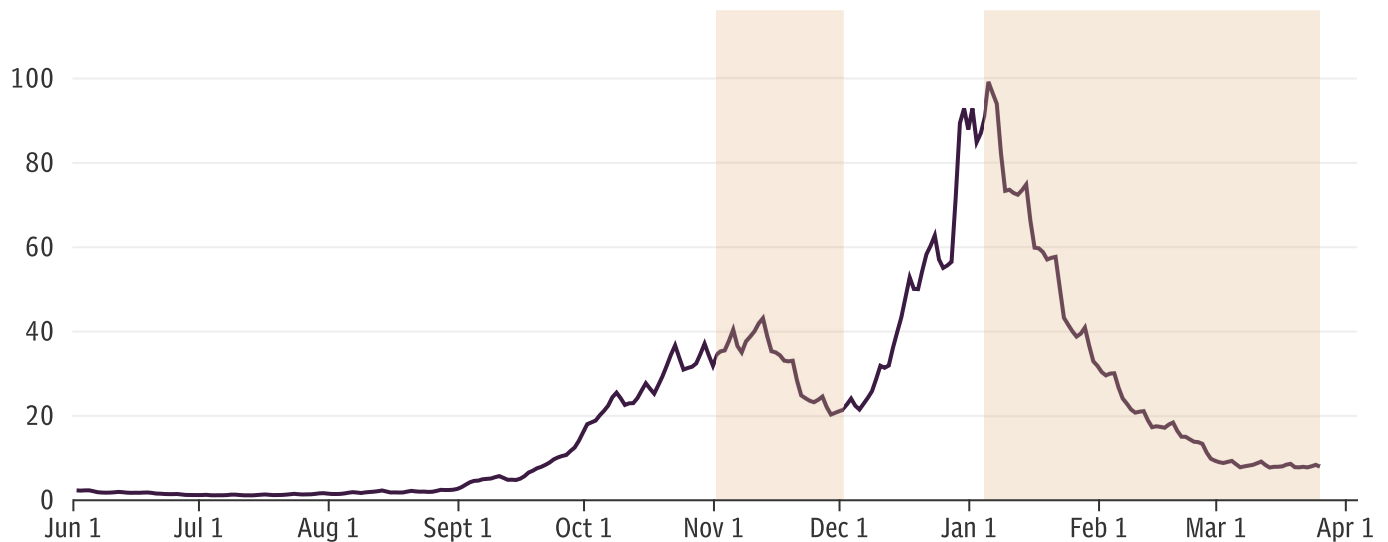
They believe the Government, acting on the advice of behavioural experts, has emphasised the threat from Covid without putting the risks in sufficient context, leaving the country in “a state of heightened anxiety”.

They also claim that “inflated fear levels will be responsible for the [‘collateral’ deaths of many thousands of people](#) with non-Covid illnesses” who are “too frightened to attend hospital”.

What effect does a national lockdown have on cases?

Daily Covid-19 cases per 100,000

England National Lockdown



Source: [PHE](#)

They are so concerned that the British public has been the subject of a mass experiment in the use of strategies that operate “below their level of awareness” that they have made a formal complaint to their professional body, which will now rule on whether government advisers have been guilty of a breach of ethics.

The Government, and its advisers, deny any such transgression, arguing that they have simply presented the public with the facts about the threat Covid poses, and what they need to do to stay safe.

One of the key pieces of evidence cited by those who have complained about “covert” tactics comes from a document prepared for the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) at the beginning of the pandemic a year ago.

Dated March 22, the paper written by the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours (SPI-B) stated: “A substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened; it could be that they are reassured by the low death rate in their demographic group, although levels of concern may be rising ... the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-

hitting emotional messaging. To be effective this must also empower people by making clear the actions they can take to reduce the threat.”

The same document presented a grid of 14 options for increasing compliance which included “use media to increase sense of personal threat”, a tactic which was seen as having a “high” effectiveness though spill-over effects “could be negative”.

Some Sage participants now admit to feeling “embarrassed” by such advice.

One regular Sage attendee said: “The British people have been subjected to an unevaluated psychological experiment without being told that is what’s happening.

“All of this is about trying to steer behaviour in the direction an elite has decided, rather than deciding if it is the right thing or the ethical thing to do.”

September 21 2020
UK could have
50,000 Covid cases
a day by mid-
October, say
scientific advisers

September 22 2020
'I stand by it':
Professor Lockdown
doubles down on
500k UK coronavirus
deaths forecast

February 4 2021
Kent variant '30%
more deadly
than normal
strain of Covid'

February 22 2021
Tens of thousands
more will die as
lockdown eases,
advisers warn

March 10 2021
Kent variant of
coronavirus up to
twice as deadly,
study suggests

Mass messaging: advisers recommended that the Government use the media to increase the sense of personal threat

The Sage member said SPI-B reports tended not to be “challenged” by Sage because “the core membership of Sage is not very well equipped to evaluate it – there are not other social scientists at the heart of Sage”.

They added: “When someone from SPI-B is saying we need to ramp up the fear and keep it ramped up – there wasn’t much questioning of that at the beginning and most of the

questioning came from external sources, not from within.”

Gary Sidley, a retired NHS consultant clinical psychologist, said: “It’s as if there is a little industry around pandemic management and it excludes alternative voices.

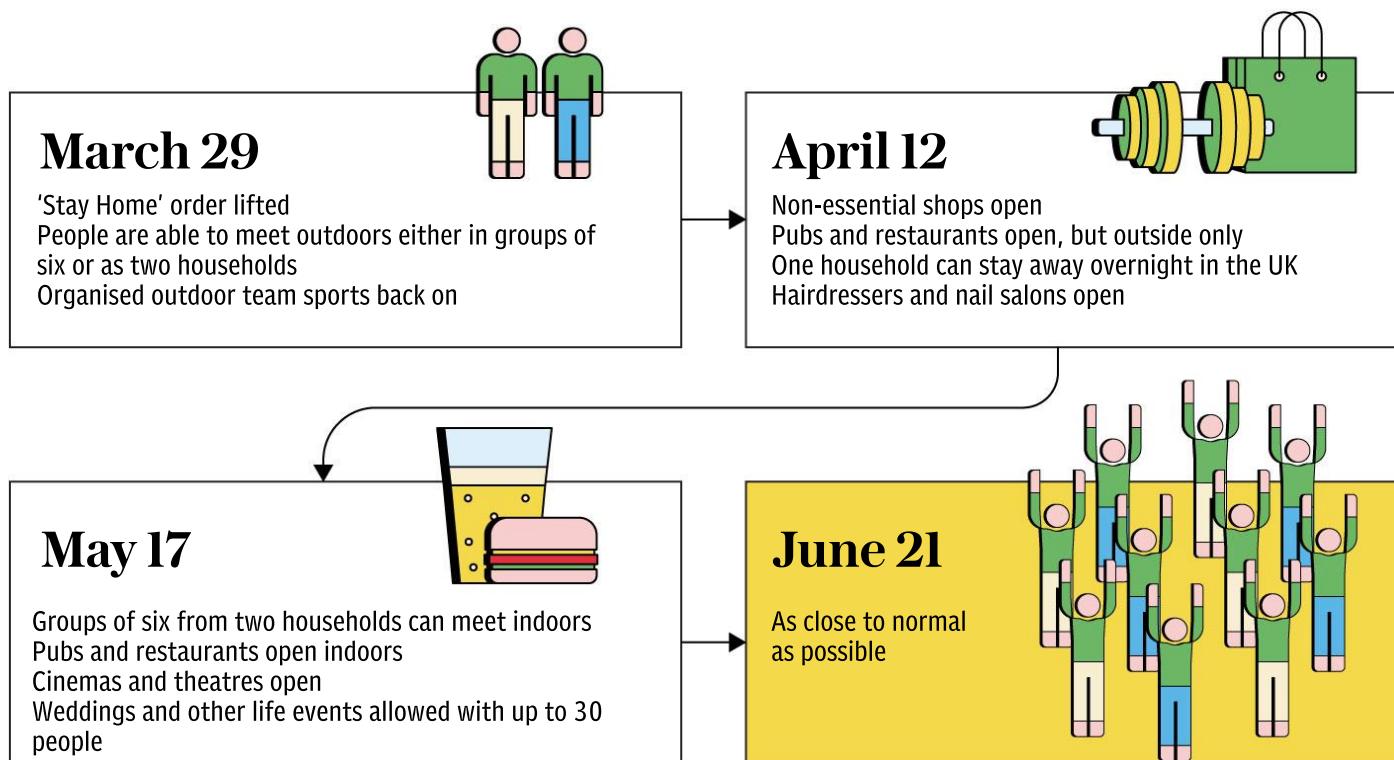
“There is growing concern within my field about using fear and shame as a driver of behaviour change.”

Mr Sidley was so concerned that he and 46 colleagues wrote to the British Psychological Society (BPS) raising “concerns about the activities of government-employed psychologists ... in their mission to gain the public’s mass compliance with the ongoing coronavirus restrictions”.

The letter added: “Our view is that the use of covert psychological strategies – that operate below the level of people’s awareness – to ‘nudge’ citizens to conform to a contentious and unprecedented public health policy raises profound ethical questions.”

The Telegraph has learnt that the BPS’s ethics committee will discuss the matter at its next meeting on June 21 – coincidentally the same day all lockdown restrictions are due to end.

The key lockdown roadmap dates



The BPS is a membership organisation and can recommend that members are reprimanded, suspended or expelled. In extreme cases it can raise concerns with the regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council, as a fitness to practise issue.

A spokesman for the BPS said it was “not possible to conclude” from publicly available information “that an intense psychological attack by the Government and orchestrated by Sage has been used to encourage people to comply with government policies regarding Covid-19” but added that the matter would be discussed by the ethics committee and: “It is not appropriate for us to comment on whether the Government’s coronavirus response has used contentious public health policies.”

SPI-B participant Professor Susan Michie, director of the Centre for Behaviour Change at University College London, told The Telegraph that “persuasion” was one of 10 options put forward for increasing adherence to social distancing in the document, and that it involved giving people “an accurate perception of risk and therefore, for some, increasing the personal threat they perceive, along with being empowered to take actions to reduce the threat”.

Not that the SPI-B paper is by any means the only evidence of what critics describe as “covert” methods.

Others cite, for example, the fact that the Government tells the public how many people have died within 28 days of a positive Covid test, but does not include the context of whether deaths are above or below the seasonal norm, and also gives daily figures for hospital admissions, but not how many people have recovered.

Terrifying predictions, which are often presented in such a way that they seem like certainties, have also come from the likes of Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer, and Sir Patrick Vallance, the Chief Scientific Adviser.



Chris Whitty, left, and Sir Patrick Vallance have been responsible for predictions that have terrified the public

In October, ahead of a parliamentary vote on a national lockdown, Sir Patrick warned in a press conference of up to 4,000 deaths per day in the second wave, only for [Prof Whitty to admit days later that 1,000 deaths per day was a more likely peak](#) (the second wave peaked at an average of 1,248 daily deaths).

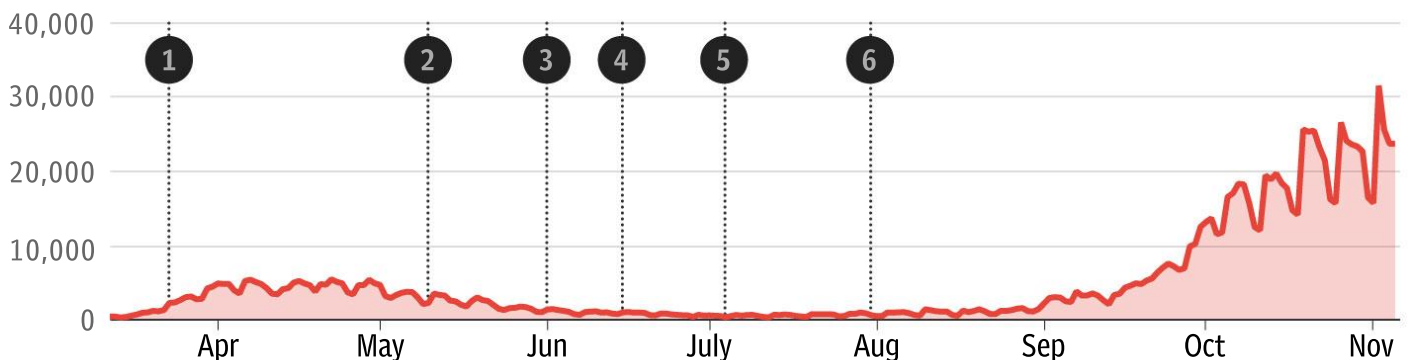
Giving evidence to MPs last month, Prof Whitty and Sir Patrick warned of a fresh spike in cases when schools reopened – [which has so far failed to materialise](#) – and suggested another 30,000 people could die (deaths are currently averaging fewer than 50 per day and continue to fall).

A planned [relaxation of social restrictions over Christmas was scaled back](#) because of concerns about the emergence of the Kent variant of the virus, which Mr Johnson later said “may be associated with a higher degree of mortality”. He was accused of “science by press release” by Dr Susan Hopkins, of Public Health England, who complained that it was too early to know if it was more deadly, and earlier this week a survey involving Dr Hopkins reported that there was [no evidence of higher mortality](#) from the Kent strain.

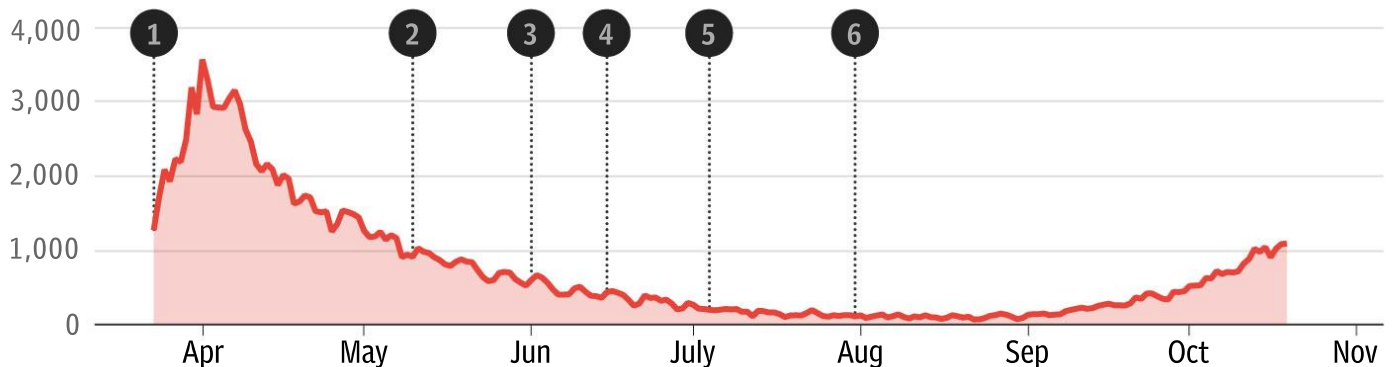
Easing first lockdown did not result in the feared case rise

- 1 March 23 2020: Lockdown begins**
Boris Johnson tells the country they must stay at home
- 2 May 10: Lockdown eased**
People allowed out multiple times per day, garden centres reopen, sport allowed, anyone who cannot work from home encouraged to go back to work
- 3 June 1: Schools and Sports**
Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 back to school, elite sport back, groups of six allowed to meet outside
- 4 June 15: Major easing**
Non-essential shops reopen, churches open for private prayer, and Year 10 and 12 at secondary schools can return for some face-to-face support
- 5 July 4: Major relaxation**
Pubs reopen, wedding services allowed as social distancing relaxed to one-metre plus
- 6 July 31: Further easing paused**
Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty says the UK has 'probably reached near the limits or the limits of what we can do in terms of opening up society'

Daily Covid-19 cases by specimen date

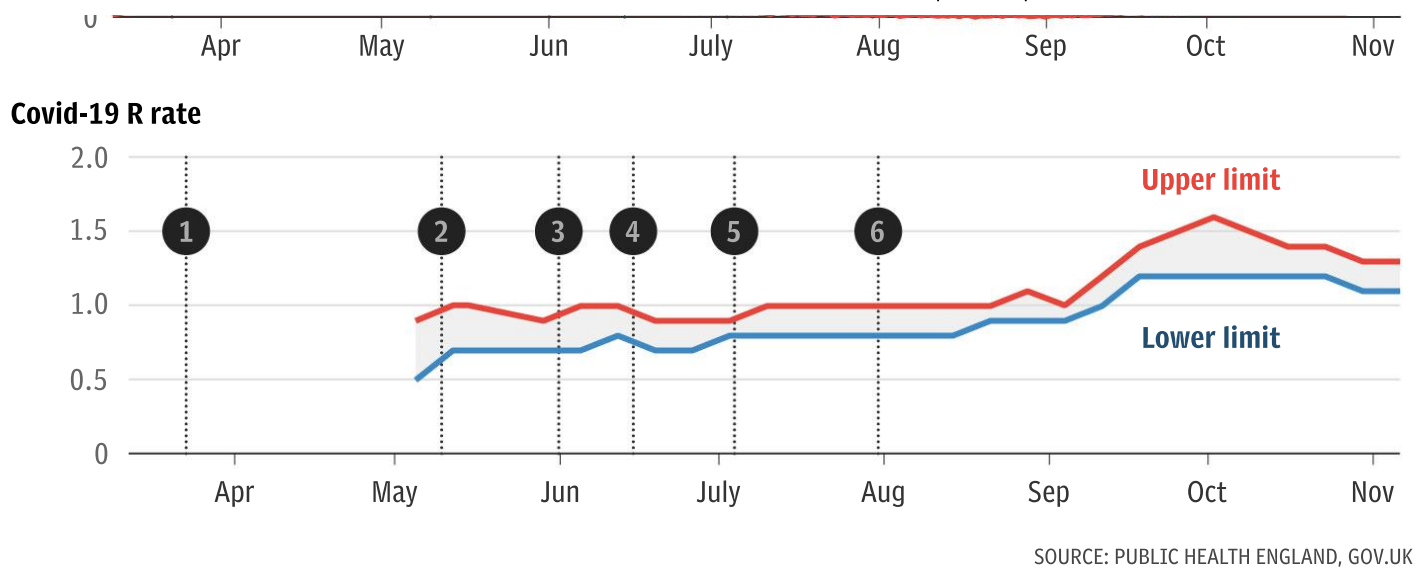


Daily Covid -19 patients admitted to hospital



Daily Covid-19 deaths with 28 days of positive test





Paul Dolan, Professor of Behavioural Science at the London School of Economics, said: “The idea that you need to increase people’s personal threat disproportionately to the threat they face is a problem. It sets a very dangerous precedent – weaponising fear is the phrase that people use.

“Once the fear has been stoked you can’t diminish it. It’s not like turning a tap on and off – you can’t turn the fear off.

“We have focused narrowly on mortality rates and case rates, but I’m pretty certain that the public would understand placing the deaths in the context of five-year averages.

“There has been such a missed opportunity for communicating risk. Rather than just saying a hundred people have died today from Covid, the Government could say what proportion of deaths that accounts for, and whether or not that translates to excess deaths.

“That may be a more sustainable conversation to have with the public, rather than ‘be scared and stay scared’”

Senior government sources have admitted that levels of compliance went far beyond what they expected in the first lockdown, forcing Boris Johnson to publicly [implore workers to get back to the office](#) last summer.

One source said: “There were genuine fears a year ago that we were going to see supermarkets running out of food and a run on the banks. We never considered that people would go even further than the stay at home advice.”

The same source admitted that the curfew brought in last year was designed to “send a clear signal to young people” that the virus was still dangerous, rather than because of any evidence a curfew would cut infections – which, it could be argued, was another example of behavioural science being used in a “covert” way.

It clearly worked. Last July, a survey carried out by the consultancy firm Kekst CNC found that almost half of respondents, discounting “don’t knows”, thought Covid had killed 1 per cent of the UK population, equating to more than 600,000 people, when the actual figure at the time was 44,000. Almost a third of respondents thought 6 to 10 per cent, or more, of the population had been killed by Covid, which would mean up to 6.6 million deaths.

While Rishi Sunak has openly discussed his concerns about the [effects of lockdown on the economy](#) – effects which will continue beyond June if people remain too afraid to go back to their normal lives – there are other consequences of instilling fear in the public.

Laura Dodsworth, who has spent the past year researching this subject for a forthcoming book called *A State of Fear: How the UK Government Weaponised Fear During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, said: “I have interviewed people who have been undone by fear, people who have had to be talked down from suicide and people who have developed agoraphobia.

“The problem with fear is that it clouds rational thinking. You become more reliant on government messaging, which makes you more frightened, which makes you even more reliant on their messaging, creating a doom loop. We have forgotten how to analyse risk.”

Another “doom loop” may also be at play: the Government puts huge effort into tracking public sentiment to help inform policy, but critics say that creates an inevitable circle in which the public, put in fear by government messaging, favours a cautious approach to lifting lockdown, which the Government then uses to justify keeping the country in lockdown for longer, and so on.

A report by Nottingham University last year suggested that fear could even translate into additional Covid deaths because [poor mental health weakens the immune system](#).

The report said: “It is well known that when negative mood states persist over time they result in the dysregulation of physiological systems involved in the regulation of the immune system. Thus, there exists significant potential for the psychological harm inflicted by the pandemic to translate into physical harm. This could include an increased susceptibility to the virus, worse outcomes if infected, or indeed poorer responses to vaccinations in the future.”

Behavioural science is so embedded in government that for the past decade it has taken advice from the Behavioural Insights Team, better known as the “Nudge Unit”, which began as part of the Cabinet Office but [is now a limited company](#). A spokesman for the BIT said that “techniques such as ‘fear inflation’ are not, and have never been, recommended by BIT”.

Lord O'Donnell, who was Cabinet secretary at the time the BIT was set up, is among those who believe the Government got the balance wrong in its messaging around Covid.

He said: “Was the messaging subtle enough? We might have concentrated so much on Covid that we have scared people away from going to a hospital.

“Every night you get deaths, cases, patients in hospital, but you don't get the economic costs every night or the indirect consequences like missed cancer tests ... they present this as an entirely medical thing.

“I also hate the phrase social distancing, when what they want is physical distancing. We don't want people to be socially distant, we want social togetherness.”

A government spokesman denied covert techniques had been used, adding: “Since the start of the pandemic we have followed the advice of our world-leading scientists and medical experts, taking the right measures at the right time to defeat coronavirus.

“We have set out clear instructions to the British people as our approach and knowledge of the virus has developed, and taken decisive action to delay the spread of the disease, reduce the number of people needing hospital treatment, and ultimately save lives.

“We are clear we want this lockdown to be the last and are easing restrictions in a way that is cautious and guided by the data.”

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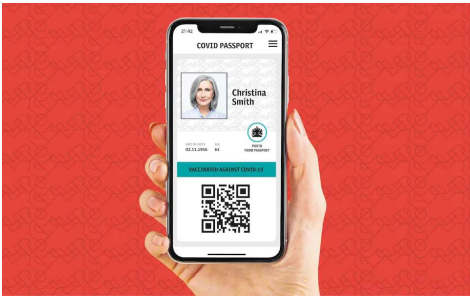
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