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Humanities Common Room, University of Johannesburg, APK
(C-Ring 319)

Covid-19 Modelling Accuracy during the Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 modelling accuracy was described in the UK parliament on 18 January 2022 as a “national scandal”. Why was modelling accuracy in the UK perceived to be so poor during the Covid-19 pandemic?



This paper argues that the move away from ‘descriptive modelling’ to ‘mechanistic modelling’ in the disease modelling community, was partly responsible for this blind spot. Mechanistic models that were not suited for short term predictions, were used for short term predictions. It further argues that the combination of an increased complexity of simulation models, the uncertainty in multiple input parameters, and a precautionary approach, resulted in a compounding effect, resulting in large errors in prediction.

The strong recommendation for costly suppression measures was based on modelled counterfactual scenarios that predicted disaster, even for optimal mitigation approaches. After each pandemic wave, most modelers were focused on justifying their recommended interventions, and not on evaluating or calibrating their original projections. The result was that there was little improvement in modelling accuracy over time. While it was difficult initially to scrutinize counterfactual projections, it became possible later in the pandemic where restrictions were lifted and the level of increase in variables did not match the modelled predictions at all. This was a clear indication that the initial models significantly over-estimated the effect of government-imposed interventions.

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