

'Infect the young and isolate those at risk' - One German scientist's plan to end the lockdown

By Justin Huggler Berlin 11 April 2020 • 11:08pm

A leading German epidemiologist who predicted the coronavirus crisis in Europe is now calling for governments to end the lockdown.

Prof Alexander Kekulé warned the virus was about to engulf Europe and publicly urged Angela Merkel's government to start screening international travellers as early as January.

But he now believes the lockdown is in danger of going on too long and causing more damage than the virus, and has drawn up a plan for how it can be safely lifted.

"It's impossible to wait for a vaccine," Prof Kekulé told The Telegraph. "The quickest we could have a vaccine ready is in six months. Based on experience, I'd say the reality is closer to a year. We can't stay under lockdown for six months to a year. If we did that our society and our culture would be ruined."

Prof Kekulé, the head of microbiology at Halle University, has been the Cassandra of [Germany's coronavirus crisis](#). As early as January 22, he called for travellers to be tested for the virus at airports and borders. He appeared on national television, but his warnings fell on deaf ears. Now the world is in the grip of a widespread pandemic:

"If we had started testing and following the chains of infection in January, we could have contained the epidemic here without resorting to a lockdown," he says. "If you can get to people by the time they've infected 20 people you can stop it. But by the time it's 400, there's no chance."

By March, when the virus had Germany in its grip, he was calling for the border to be closed and schools to shut down.

"At that stage a lockdown was the only option to slow the spread and prevent hospitals being overwhelmed," he says. "But now we have to consider the possibility that a long lockdown may end up doing more harm than the virus."

Angela Merkel has dampened hopes of restrictions ending any time soon, telling Germans this week: "We must not be reckless now. We could very quickly destroy what we have achieved."

Not for the first time in this crisis, Prof Kekulé finds himself on the opposite side of the argument from Mrs Merkel. When he urged her government to do more about the virus in January, she chose to wait and see. Now he says the lockdown can be safely lifted by following a simple three-point plan.

First, he says, the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions who are most vulnerable to the virus must remain in isolation.

“We have to persuade them to stay at home, and that means we have to find ways of making it bearable for them, such as apps that will allow them to order their shopping or continue their social life,” he says.

“If they are determined to go out, fine — but they have to wear full FFP medical standard masks.”

That brings us to the second point in Prof Kekulé’s plan: a move from social distancing to what he calls “smart distancing”.

“We need to adapt distancing to the situation. A cashier at a supermarket check-out, for instance, is going to be exposed to infection all day. He needs to wear a mask, he needs proper hygiene measures. A taxi driver needs to learn not to touch his face after handling money.”

Basically, we all need to get used to wearing facemasks, Prof Kekulé says. “If you look at Hong Kong, they managed to avoid a major outbreak there and they’re very close to Guangdong in mainland China, which was badly affected. One of the key differences was they started wearing facemasks early in Hong Kong.”

An ordinary surgical mask is sufficient for those who are not especially vulnerable, he says, and there’s no need to wear one while going for a walk. “In an open air setting a mask isn’t that effective. But in any indoors setting when others are there, we should all be wearing them.”

He’s even come up with a slogan to convince people, “Kein Held ohne Maske”, and an English version: “Be a masked superhero”.

Thirdly, and most controversially, Prof Kekulé says we have to let the young get the virus.

“People under 50 are very, very unlikely to die or get seriously ill from the coronavirus,” he says. “We have to let them get infected so they can develop immunity.”

Essentially, this is a return to the herd immunity plan once backed by the UK and widely seen as discredited. But Prof Kekulé argues that once the outbreak is under control and hospitals are not overwhelmed, there is a place for it.

Children are least at risk so the lockdown should be lifted at schools and kindergartens first, he says — a plan already adopted by Denmark, which plans to reopen schools after Easter.

[Germany has won plaudits for testing more than other European countries](#), carrying out around 100,000 tests a day, but Prof Kekulé says that’s not enough. He says it needs to be raised to 500,000.

He concedes that some younger people do get seriously ill and die from the coronavirus. “What happens in these cases is their immune system overreacts and starts attacking their own body,” he says.

“But this only happens with a very small number of people. I know it sounds heartless but we may have to live with these deaths.

“Herd immunity is our only option now. We cannot wait for a vaccine. We have to

find a way to live with this virus.”

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