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Britain: Matt Hancock, hero of the pandemic? NHS staff would laugh if it weren't a tragedy

Thursday 15 December 2022, by [CLARKE Rachel](#) (Date first published: 10 December 2022).

In a new book, the former health secretary blames everyone but himself for Covid. It's disgusting

'Matt Hancock unleashed.' It's a potent image and one, I suspect, we all could have done without. But the *Daily Mail* has papers to sell and this was [how it chose](#) to promote its serialisation of the genital-munching, scorpion-dodging, forgiveness-seeking former health secretary's much-hyped *Pandemic Diaries*. Explosive, jaw-dropping, electrifying. That was the *Mail's* verdict. But for this NHS palliative care doctor (biased, you could say, by my own pandemic spent caring for the dying on Covid wards), attempting to digest Hancock's 592-page tome was an altogether more emetic experience.

They may lack the visceral repulsiveness - and frank insensitivity — of those televised bushtucker trials, but Hancock's written efforts at exculpation share much in common with his recent flirtation with reality TV. Both are a weird hybrid of openness and artifice, of artfulness dressed up as candour. You'll recall Hancock billing his *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* jaunt as an act of public service. "It's as clear as day that politicians like me must go to where the people are - particularly those who are politically disengaged. We must wake up and embrace popular culture," [he told the Sun](#).

His intent is clear: he wants you to believe this is a no-holds-barred, first draft of history

Much like being pelted with slurry and cockroaches for a £400,000 appearance fee, diary-writing is another example of noble acquiescence to a higher cause: "What matters is that we learn the right lessons, with humility and evidence... I have written this book to help those in the hot seat next time." He describes the work as "definitive", "honest", "contemporaneous" and "warts and all", noting that it was "written as a diary, sometimes hour by hour, but mostly day by day". Oddly, for a diary-writer, he required the presence of seasoned NHS-basher Isabel Oakeshott to co-author his words. Maybe Alan Bennett missed a trick.

While Hancock is careful to stress that he was far too busy to write everything in real time, his intent is clear: he wants you to believe this is a no-holds-barred, first draft of history. The unvarnished truth, in essence – and what a truth it is. You might not realise, for example, that as far back as [New Year's Day 2020](#) – not even 24 hours after China first announced a small outbreak of a mystery pneumonia – Hancock spotted the news, immediately identified the threat to Britain and asked his private office to prepare him an urgent briefing. His prescience persisted. A mere three weeks later, he was leading not only the UK's but the world's response to Covid, phoning Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization, to urge him to declare the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. Soon Boris Johnson is praising Hancock for running everything “like a one-man war cabinet right now”.

If only the prime minister, the cabinet, the chief medical officer, the chief scientific officer, the NHS, care homes, frontline staff and, yes, even Kate Bingham – heroine of vaccine procurement, yet [singled out for a knifing](#) by Hancock – had listened to him more closely. Because judging by this book, he was bang on every time, pushing hard for vaccines, fighting for the rights of care home residents and even working out from the get-go that Covid was being transmitted asymptotically. Surrounded by laggards and fools in every direction, his greatest regret is that “I failed to insist that all policy be based on the worst-case assumption that the disease should pass on without symptoms. It doesn't matter that I was battling a global scientific consensus: there was enough evidence that this consensus was wrong, and I should have insisted it be challenged.” For a man without a shred of medical or scientific training, it's deeply impressive stuff.

Hancock, incidentally, was always battling. He adores the language of war, deploying it relentlessly to reflect the essential heroism of his one-man stand. After detailing his exhausting daily rounds of meetings, emails, phone calls and interviews, he comments: “I say none of this for sympathy and deserve none. I chose to accept the role of health secretary and a pandemic is an occupational hazard, as war is to a soldier. To serve in this way was an honour.” I literally threw the book across the room at this point. A much-loved nurse and two porters died of Covid in my NHS trust – and none of us who risked our lives as key workers will ever unsee those pitiful images of colleagues wearing [bin bags](#) as PPE.

Needless to say, Hancock's self-serving claims are a load of kangaroo testicles. Often, he out and out lies in his efforts to stockpile glory while stringing up others – always with one eye on the [UK Covid-19 inquiry](#). He makes the disgusting claim, without a shred of evidence, that GPs tried to divert the public from vaccine centres into their own practices in order to pocket £12.50 for each vaccination: “Top marks for enterprise, but no points for public spirit.” He tries to pin on NHS CEO Simon Stevens the blame for sending residents back to their care homes from hospital without negative Covid tests – but alters a key date from mid-March to early April to make Stevens look more culpable. On 18 April 2020, a full month after a horrendously overrun Northwick Park hospital in London had run out of beds, ventilators and, very nearly, oxygen, he has the temerity to claim: “Hospitals and care homes haven't yet grasped the fact that we're only going to get out of this if we test, test, test.” Most despicable of all is the attempt to blame care workers themselves for the terrible death toll in care homes.

Somehow, despite all this, Hancock has the brass neck to conclude the book with a fluffy assurance that, “I have a positive view of human nature and believe in the great, generous, kind spirit of people as individuals.” Really, Matt? You spend three weeks on reality TV begging for forgiveness, yet you pour bitchiness and vitriol all over everyone else who tried their flawed best in a pandemic? I'm afraid this book is the written equivalent of being forced to binge-watch that [CCTV footage](#) of Hancock's hands all over Gina Coladangelo's bottom. It's absolutely nauseating.

Rachel Clarke

P.S.

- The Observer. The Guardian. Sat 10 Dec 2022 19.00 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/10/matt-hancock-hero-of-the-pandemic-nhs-staff-would-laugh-if-it-werent-a-tragedy>

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