

‘Holy sh—, it works’: How an out-of-the-box UK COVID recovery trial evaluating a common drug has saved a million lives

[Epidemiologist Peter Horby’s] summary was pithy.

“Holy shit, it works.”

On June 16 [2020], after verifying the data, the Recovery Trial [announced](#) the news: A drug had finally been shown to reduce Covid-19’s mortality. Dexamethasone became part of the standard of care across the world. A UK government estimate published in March 2021 [concluded](#) that the drug’s use had so far saved 22,000 lives in the UK and an estimated 1 million lives worldwide.

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In the US, the New York Times’s Carl Zimmer [wrote](#) in January 2021: “many trials for Covid antivirals were doomed from the start — too small and poorly designed to provide useful data.”

The United Kingdom’s Recovery Trial was the opposite: massive and simple.

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The National Health Service runs most hospitals in the country, and their staff, including the research staff, are all government employees. British patients’ medical records are all shared in one data system.

This made setting up the world’s biggest clinical trial in the middle of a pandemic straightforward. To hear the doctors involved tell it, it was as simple as the country’s chief medical officer sending a letter to the head of every hospital, asking them to take part. The grand experiment was soon underway.

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