

A good man died after too much Covid misinformation – while his hero, lockdown sceptic Ivor Cummins, goes on making money from devotees

[Sam McBride](#)

DUP councillor Paul Hamill was the victim of a pandemic of misinformation

Controversial: DUP councillor Paul Hamill, a former mayor of Antrim and Newtownabbey Council. The father-of-two died earlier this month after contracting Covid

September 25 2021 07:00 AM

-
-
-

On the day that Paul Hamill died, the man whose undermining of public health advice had profoundly impacted the 46-year-old father-of-two made a typically self-assured post on Twitter. Ivor Cummins wrote about the coronavirus vaccine: “It’s the scam of the century, perhaps any century.”

Mr Hamill was a devoted disciple of Mr Cummins. Despite the Dublin engineer having no qualifications in virology or epidemiology, his videos have been watched more than 13 million times on YouTube, establishing him as a key figure questioning the medical and scientific consensus.

Repeatedly, Mr Hamill urged broadcasters to interview Mr Cummins. There was missional zeal in Mr Hamill’s promotion of a man whose output he only appears to have discovered less than a year before his death.

“People need to hear the truth,” he said, “his videos are amazing... it will open your eyes... come on Stephen Nolan have the debate, get [Cummins] on your show, unless your [sic] scared.”

After weeks in hospital critically ill since contracting Covid, last Tuesday he died of multi-organ failure and pneumonia, exacerbated by the fact that he was more vulnerable because he was on immunosuppressants for arthritis.

Even in the face of such tragedy some people cannot resist sneering. Aside from being distasteful, that does nothing to understand why so many other people similarly see the pandemic as some dark plot, or why Northern Ireland now has the lowest vaccination rate in the British Isles.

But one thing about Mr Hamill is different: he was a politician, a councillor in the DUP, he knew senior government figures who were imposing restrictions.

How does someone who is a politician in Northern Ireland’s biggest political party come to believe that the measures which his party colleagues are taking are part of a global scam?

The story of how Mr Hamill came to be convinced that people like Mr Cummins knew more about a new deadly virus than most doctors or scientists – or even his party colleagues – is both poignant and instructive.

One DUP politician who knew Mr Hamill well said that he “became a little bit obsessive”, adding: “I can’t quite understand it.” Indeed, most of those who knew him and who spoke to me this week recalled him in the warmest terms.

One councillor from another party said: “I know people always say this about people who die, but Paul was such a lovely, lovely guy.”

Billy Webb, the Alliance mayor of Antrim and Newtownabbey — a position held by Mr Hamill in 2018 — said that “regardless of party affiliation...his decency shone through in everything he did”.

At the heart of Mr Hamill’s changing worldview was social media. For a decade he had posted largely unremarkable information on Twitter — news of a new kitten, Bible verses, some politics, and photos of his young children.

When lockdown began last March the councillor was delivering meals to vulnerable people, hailing the NHS as the “Nation’s Hope Supplier” and urging people to “stay home and stay safe”.

But within weeks he was questioning what was going on, first through Mail on Sunday lockdown sceptic Peter Hitchens, and then less prominent people.

Last September he first posted a link to one of Mr Cummins’ videos. The following month, he wondered whether the media was “biased or controlled”, and asked: “Why are they doing this?” By now Mr Cummins’ output was heavily influencing the councillor. In less than a year he mentioned Mr Cummins 180 times.

When he asked Mr Cummins for a video on Northern Ireland, a curt reply came back: “No time for NI — it’s a mortality nothing-burger.” At that point some 1,124 people here had already died after contracting coronavirus.

By the start of this year Mr Hamill’s interest in the topic was intense. He asked Mr Cummins for a video, telling him “I’ll make sure ministers in the NI Executive get it”.

Days later Mr Cummins told him he was “too busy to breath [sic]”.

Two months later Mr Hamill, who had been a pastor before entering politics, posted something which is now unspeakably poignant. He said: “This screenshot is my risk of dying from Covid, 0.0036%.”

The following month he said: “I sense there will be the greatest ever ‘I told you so’ coming regarding #COVID19 #vaccine #VaccinePassport #pcrtest #lft #lockdown from people like [Mr Cummins]...and others.”

By June he was saying “take off your mask” because they “do more harm than good”.

How did someone, who a fellow councillor described as “a man of great faith who I don’t believe would have been easily swayed”, come to believe with religious fervour that the public were being lied to?

One friend said: “He wasn’t into 5G [conspiracies] or any of that stuff. I didn’t see any major warning signs; it’s almost like he was being radicalised. People don’t appreciate how powerful the internet is and how powerful WhatsApp is.”

Ivor Cummins was not the only Covid sceptic who Mr Hamill followed, but he appears to have been the one with whom he connected the most.

Calling himself ‘The Fat Emperor’, Mr Cummins presents himself as the antithesis of a conspiracy theorist. On his telling, he is driven by data and science, while governments, medics, scientists and others are acting irrationally.

But he picks evidence he thinks backs up his position at that moment. When a scientific study last June estimated lockdowns had saved three million lives in Europe, Mr Cummins not only dismissed it, but likened it to Nazi propaganda.

Having worked for Hewlett-Packard as a research and development manager, he was involved in applying for patents for printer lid manifolds and printheads, and then branched out into dieting, believing that he could treat his medical problems better than doctors.

Behind the arrogant self-confidence lie obvious contradictions or exaggerations. When lockdown began he said “masks should have been a top priority for all — no brainer”. But by October he was saying that making people wear masks “made zero scientific sense”.

After an order for more ventilators was scrapped last August, Mr Cummins said: “Actions speak louder than words. They KNOW the chances of a ‘second wave’ are tiny and make no scientific sense — so they dump the capacity.”

Earlier that month he claimed “the epidemic [is] long since gone”. A few weeks earlier he had claimed that “only the largely immune at this stage remain, across most of Europe”.

When asked by me about those claims, he appeared to reluctantly accept they were wrong, saying: “The only thing myself and my scientific network were somewhat off on was the estimate of achieved immunity.”

But there was no humility: “We were way more correct across all scientific vectors in this, when compared to the utter nonsense pouring forth from the ‘experts’ and the media.”

In June 2021 he dismissed the seriousness of the Delta variant, claiming to have found “empirical proof that the variant doesn’t add up to anything much” and dismissing it as a “political scariant”. Last month a large study published in The Lancet said that evidence pointed to Delta variant-infected people being twice as likely to end up in hospital.

In March he claimed that Ireland is in the grip of fascism and that “pharma and the most evil people on our planet are running this show”. In May he claimed “pharma-conflicted forces are working hard behind the scenes, to ruin/sell out our society. They are organised, cunning and will stop at nothing”.

Mr Cummins has made a career out of such commentary. Last year he appealed for money to make a film about himself, describing it as “charting one man’s remarkable rise to prominence as a ‘go to’ Covid commentator and deep data analyst”.

More than £150,000 poured in. The film was due months ago; Mr Cummins told me it had been delayed but would be out soon.

On top of that there are 1,627 people funding him through Patreon, a website which facilitates monthly payments ranging from £3 to £232. If all those individuals are giving £3, they are contributing just over £58,572 a year. If everyone is paying £232, they are contributing more than £4.5m a year. Patreon did not respond to a request for comment.

On top of that, Mr Cummins advertises for donations through PayPal.

Mr Cummins was indignant at being asked how much money he makes: “You are asking me for details of my breadwinner’s income for my family, my personal, private business? You are seriously asking this?”

After being asked three times he eventually said that he had taken a pay cut from his previous job, that he has no financial motive for this work and he is driven by “truth in science and data” and a belief in a healthy, free society.

Mr Cummins did not like being asked if he felt any responsibility for the death of a man who followed him avidly. “What have you done for population health, eh?” he retorted. “I thought as much — so the crass virtue signalling is absurd yet again.”

He said Mr Hamill's death "may indeed have been 'from Covid' (albeit highly, highly unlikely)", and said that the risk "of truly dying very prematurely from Covid-19 in Northern Ireland has been effectively near-zero... for a genuinely healthy man of 46, the risk would be essentially infinitesimal". Mr Cummins added: "Sharing the actual science, data, risk quotients and logic of any issue would never cause one to 'feel responsibility' for an individual's personal situation."

A few hours later he warned that he may sue this newspaper, and the author personally, for "malicious defamation", seeking "exemplary damages".

In an article in January libertarian Christopher Snowden — who himself had been critical of lockdown — said that the claims made by Mr Cummins are "demonstrably nonsensical and yet they are eagerly lapped up by an army of social media disciples".

He added: "Doubt is at the heart of this phenomenon, and it is being unscrupulously exploited... [his followers] are not necessarily unintelligent people. They are unhappy people wearing a mask of happiness, confused and beaten and searching for an easy answer. They want someone to flick a switch and make everything normal again. Who doesn't?"

Many of the views Mr Hamill shared were clearly illogical and irrational. And yet none of us live lives wholly driven by logic. Many of those scorning such stupidity will themselves either drink too much, smoke, speed in their cars or act in other ways which they know to be potentially deadly.

In one sense Mr Hamill was a victim of another pandemic, one which will outlast Covid and for which many people are ill-equipped. Deaths and near-deaths of those who believe the virus is exaggerated are perhaps the only thing which will cause likeminded people to reconsider.

Two of Mr Hamill's friends said that once he entered intensive care last month many of his friends who had shared his views got vaccinated.

The economist Tim Harford recently wrote that Covid scepticism alludes to the deeper problem that "a small but significant minority lack confidence not just in vaccines, but in the state, corporations, experts and modernity in general".

Deriding such people is unlikely to persuade them they are wrong. When someone who is himself a politician in a party of government has lost confidence in the system of which he is part, society has a serious problem.