

Ivor Cummins: the ‘hardcore problem solver’ who experts claim is talking ‘rubbish’ on Covid-19

Ivor Cummins, the chemical engineer turned food author whose controversial views on the coronavirus have gone viral worldwide, is adamant that the virus should no longer be a major concern despite widespread condemnation from leading scientists

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Ivor Cummins of the Fat Emperor Podcast: ‘I will debate any expert openly in the tradition of the best science.’ Picture: Fergal Phillips

A surgeon recently sent Ivor Cummins a letter which contained a picture of a flock of birds flying in one direction while a single bird flies the other way.

The message thanked Cummins for raising issues the surgeon said he had been scared to voice, and included €1,000 as an expression of gratitude.

Over the last six months, Cummins, a chemical engineer turned diet guru, has won a significant following as a disdainful critic of the scientific consensus on Covid-19.

The 51-year-old Dubliner has been dismissed by many experts, but as more people grow weary of the impact of lockdowns and business resistance to them gains momentum, Cummins’s views, many of which experts say are based on faulty science, are gaining traction.

While social media is full of non-experts espousing unsubstantiated theories about the coronavirus, Cummins has become a particularly influential figure and there are now public health experts who believe he needs to be challenged directly.

One video from September which claimed the epidemic had “largely ended” by June in Europe and by late summer in the United States has been viewed 1.6 million times.

The theory that herd immunity can be achieved and that the virus is no longer a significant danger except to the most vulnerable people has gained credence among the business community despite being debunked by many scientists.

Cummins told this newspaper last week that he was in contact with “big worldwide names”.

Pat Byrne, the chief executive of CityJet, recently told the *Business Post* that Cummins’s videos had influenced his views on the coronavirus, although he did not share all of the latter’s opinions on the issue. Byrne did not agree with Cummins’s assertion that there was no scientific basis for mask wearing or that some “powerful people” wanted everyone in masks.

Dr Christopher JL Murray, director of the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, told the New York Times in September he was shocked at how often Cummins’s video was being raised with him.

“I’m getting calls about this hokey theory all the time from heads of major consulting companies, chief executives, asking me, ‘Is this video right?’,” Murray said.

Undermining trust

The consensus among public health experts is that Cummins’s video is not just wrong, but that such arguments are based on bad data which undermines public buy-in on efforts to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Dr Anthony Staines, professor of health systems at Dublin City University, said that most anti-lockdown theorists who use Sweden in their arguments, as Cummins does, are ignoring much of the evidence about that particular case.

“It didn’t have a lockdown, that is true, but social interactions fell dramatically and it still had a huge outbreak among its older population. Then when you look at the economic effect, it didn’t benefit compared to other Nordic countries,” Staines said.

Sweden’s GDP fell 8.6 per cent during the second quarter of the year, according to its statistics body, compared with Denmark’s 7.4 per cent fall, and Finland’s 3.2 per cent fall. Other data shows that Sweden’s deaths per million is far in excess of the numbers in those countries.

Sweden is now imposing more severe restrictions and a group of the country’s scientists have criticised authorities for earlier indulging in a “relaxed” approach to combating the virus, saying “only by failing to treat many patients over the age of 80 has intensive care been managed”.

Cummins claims that there is evidence which shows the virus should no longer be a major concern and that the social distancing restrictions are causing more harm than infections.

He says it is “within the envelope of a serious flu”. He believes that 80 per cent of people are “already de facto immune” to Covid-19 from exposure to previous coronaviruses and that masks and lockdowns have done little to stop the spread of the disease.

Staines said these views were in stark contrast to the available evidence being used by public health experts around the world. He said there were faults in the implementation of restrictions in various countries, but that the method of test, trace and isolate was the correct approach.

“Covid-19 is worrying. We know the method of infection; we know it spreads from person to person and that means we can interrupt it,” he said. “There is a lot of evidence going back 800 years that this is the way to go.”

‘Problem solver’

Shaven-headed and slim with a tidy beard, Cummins has the demeanour of a successful tech company executive.

He refers to himself as a “hardcore problem solver” and has spent 30 years in corporate technical leadership positions after graduating from UCD with a degree in chemical engineering.

Since 2012 he has pushed a low-carb diet which he claims would help lower heart disease levels around the world. This has led to him being invited to regularly address medical conferences.

None of this gives him any expertise in public health, immunology, infectious diseases or virology, but it has allowed him to become a voice to many that he is offering answers to the failings of pandemic responses around the world.

Speaking last week, Cummins said he was motivated by two things: his children and science.

“What I’ve seen in the last eight months is ruining the future for the next generation with no good warrant. The second thing is I have always stood for truth and science. I have lived as a master technologist my whole life, my whole career. And the last eight months, I have seen science turned on its head, and it hurts me.”

The claim that science is being misused or ignored by public health experts around the world is a regular theme in Cummins’s videos and media appearances. He treats established experts with a condescending contempt.

He mocks individual scientists with insults on Twitter and last week responded to media briefings from the National Public Health Emergency Team (Nphet) with one word, “bollocks”.

Gabriel Scally, president of the Epidemiology and Public Health section of the Royal Society of Medicine, has singled Cummins out for his views.

“There’s lots of rubbish talked about Sweden and #COVID19. But chemical engineer and high-fat diet guru Ivor Cummins talks more than most,” Scally tweeted recently, highlighting that the deaths per million in Sweden was higher than Ireland.

When another Twitter user responded that Cummins's views should not be amplified, Scally responded: "He is not a 'troll'. He distorts data and narratives in order to undermine Covid-19 responses."

When this was put to Cummins last week, he let out a weary sigh at the mention of Scally's name. He said he did not care about the criticisms because he is motivated only by his children's future and "sound science".

He named Scally among a list of Irish experts who have made regular media appearances warning about the dangers of the virus and accused them of "group think".

"It's like a cognitive dissonance. It's the most extraordinary phenomenon I've seen in my lifetime. I've managed big teams of people. I'm into the psychology as well as the biochemistry and it's just incredible to watch. But I would say to them, I will debate any of them openly in the tradition of the best science, open debate, no edits. We'll record it and we'll share it freely. And if they're correct, well, then I guess they'll win the debate, won't they?"

He accepted that the experts are winning the debate at present as governments are accepting the scientific consensus on the virus and European countries are introducing more restrictive measures to stop the spread of Covid-19.

But Cummins said this is because their views have not been challenged enough.

"You don't win the debate on science by having the media 100 per cent behind you, by talking to people who don't understand the science and convincing them. You only win a debate by debating someone worthy of debate. And I suggest I'm worthy of debate."

Media darling

Cummins appears to relish the attention his views confer on him. He has been quoted in the Daily Mail, Telegraph and Spiked Magazine, and appeared on TalkRadio. He even appears to hold the New York Times coverage of his video with pride, despite the article being critical. On LinkedIn he has shared an online petition calling on The Late, Late Show to invite him on as a guest.

Even if he never sits across from Ryan Tubridy on RTÉ, Cummins has already developed a wide network over which to share his views. He has almost 150,000 subscribers on his YouTube channel to which he regularly broadcasts podcast interviews and Powerpoint slides of data disputing Covid-19 modelling used by governments. He also has 1,500 subscribers to his Patreon service, which offers extra content and video calls to fans for monthly fees ranging from €3 to €250.

He is also actively organising opposition to the current Irish policies. He has written a letter to the government with Alan Farrell, a doctor, arguing that restrictions should be lifted because they claim mortality from Covid-19 is "not very much greater" than the excess mortality observed during the 2018 flu season.

Cummins said he is in daily contact with a group of Irish doctors who are working on a white paper challenging the current Irish pandemic plan.

A version of the document was shared with the Business Post last week and a list of signatories which included a number of doctors who have already expressed criticism of the government's approach.

Others included a hair restoration consultant, a functional medicine practitioner and a doctor who works as director of an acupuncture college.

It is not a list of medics who have much expertise in areas which are of use to public health responses to pandemics, but Cummins's views are not without some expert support.

"I am joined by 40,000 scientists, doctors and professors who have signed the Great Barrington Declaration," he told the Business Post.

The Great Barrington Declaration is a controversial manifesto that argues countries should allow Covid-19 to spread among young healthy people while protecting the elderly and the vulnerable and thus give herd immunity without a vaccine.

The declaration was drafted by American Institute for Economic Research, a libertarian think tank in Great Barrington, Massachusetts and has been signed by thousands of medical and scientific experts.

It has gained political support in the United States, but Anthony Fauci, the White House health adviser, has dismissed it as "total nonsense" and the American Public Health Association had said it "is not a strategy, it is a political statement".

"It ignores sound public health expertise. It preys on a frustrated populace. Instead of selling false hope that will predictably backfire, we must focus on how to manage this pandemic in a safe, responsible and equitable way."

Cummins said the doctors he was currently working with had funding for advertisements and would be linking up with the Great Barrington group to promote their call for an end to the current restrictions in Ireland.

When asked, Cummins said he believed the source of the funding was "almost irrelevant" because the people involved were not saying anything they did not believe in for the benefit of anyone else.

"We talk about the economy opening up benefiting business people, and of course it does, but the thing is the economy opening up will benefit human health. That's the point from our side: that the detrimental impact on human health, psychological health, societal health and physical health is disastrous via the lockdown mechanism."

The Great Barrington Declaration has been criticised as being driven by groups who value economic activity over human health, and was met with a swift response from thousands of doctors and scientists.

The John Snow Memorandum, named after one of the founders of modern epidemiology, serves as a rebuke to the Barrington group. It outlines the seriousness of the Covid-19 disease for many who become infected and the evidence basis for interrupting its spread.

“Any pandemic management strategy relying upon immunity from natural infections for Covid-19 is flawed. Uncontrolled transmission in younger people risks significant morbidity and mortality across the whole population. In addition to the human cost, this would impact the workforce as a whole and overwhelm the ability of healthcare systems to provide acute and routine care,” it states.

“We cannot afford distractions that undermine an effective response; it is essential that we act urgently based on the evidence,” the memo concludes.

Dr Anthony Staines, professor of health systems at Dublin City University, is among the signatories.

He is aware of Cummins and said he had respect for some of the signatories of the Great Barrington declaration for their work in different areas. But, he said, they are wrong.

“They were wrong when they said this would be over and very few more people would die in April. They were wrong again when they said it in June and wrong again when they said it in July. They were wrong when they said it was no more than a bad flu, and they are still wrong.”