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Mandatory vaccine policy could work in UK, but opt-outs for non-medical reasons should be considered

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INTERVIEW

POLICY

by Gemma Jones

LONDON, 8 Oct (APM) - A mandatory vaccination policy could work in the UK if certain requirements are met, but opt-outs for both medical and non-medical reasons should be considered, APM has been told.

The director of Yale institute of global health Dr Saad Omer, who spoke at the Foundation Merieux vaccine acceptance meeting in France two weeks ago, told APM on Monday that while opt-outs should be offered, the convenience of this should not offset the convenience of getting vaccinated.

"One of the more effective ways of ensuring there is a balance in the effort it takes to get a child vaccinated versus getting them exempt from these requirements is physician counselling," he said.

Physician counselling is a procedure in place in certain states in the U.S. such as Washington, whereby a visit to a healthcare professional is required should a person want to opt-out of a vaccination due to non-medical reasons. The healthcare professional will then explain the risks of not getting immunised.

Since the state introduced this policy, it has experienced a significant drop in vaccination refusal rates, said Omer.

The comments come after the UK's health secretary Matt Hancock said he is considering introducing a compulsory childhood vaccination policy after the country lost its measles-free status due to a drop in vaccination rates ([APMHE 64533](#)).

Omer suspects that this is partly due to the NHS being a cash-strapped service.

He said: "To my understanding, investments [in the UK's primary healthcare system] have gone down, which has had an impact on its ability to sustain high immunisation coverage."

He added that addressing access is just one issue that should be considered before a mandate is introduced.

THE 'ANTI-VAXXER' MOVEMENT

The widespread anti-vaccination movement is also being blamed for the drop in vaccination rates, in which parents are refusing to vaccinate their children because of certain risks that are not recognised by authorities.

However, Omer said mandatory vaccination policies, as well as certain other processes, can be used to help counter misinformation in the public discourse.

He said that this is a "very practical approach" and it could help capture some of the parents who are sitting on the fence.

Like many other social phenomena, there is not just a single reason for the movement, added Omer.

He said: "We know that there is a reduction in trusted authorities and government and if you have the tools to search information and not necessarily the expertise to interpret that data, or have the education in that background, then it could lead to a false impression or false empowerment.

"Vaccines also become a victim of their own success in a way," he said, adding: "After there is a reduction in rates of vaccine-preventable diseases through a higher immunisation coverage, there might be a cohort of parents who will see or hear about real or perceived side effects of vaccines."

INTERVENTION

While the debate in the UK is "void of nuance", a mandate should be part of a "suite of interventions", which does not include reminder recalls and effective communication campaigns, said Omer.

He added that vaccine communication science should have the same level of rigorous evidence as every other part of the vaccine enterprise, including vaccine development.

"There are a few tools in development, for example a concept of presumptive communications, which is language that conveys the assumption that a child will be vaccinated. There is also an interview-based approach that works with people's reasons for not getting vaccinated, and that is more of an empathy-based technique."

He said there are several tools, among the two mentioned, that have become available as a result of rigorous research.

These tools can enable healthcare professionals and public authorities to have conversations with the patients or parents to potentially increase immunisation rates.

A drop in vaccination rates can risk herd immunity, which is thought to disrupt a pathogen from spreading if a significant part of the population is immune to it.

So far, all 50 states in the U.S. require children to be vaccinated before they can attend school, and 47 of those states provide exemptions based on religious or philosophical beliefs.

Certain European countries have also or will also implement mandatory vaccination policies.

Among those countries is Germany, which is introducing compulsory measles vaccination in March 2020 ([APMHE 63735](#)). Meanwhile France has new legislation for compulsory vaccinations for diphtheria, tetanus, polio (DTP), pertussis, MMR, Haemophilus influenza B, hepatitis B (HBV), pneumococcus and meningococcal meningitis type C ([APMHE 56646](#)).

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