Making vaccination compulsory: the case for and against

- Should childhood vaccination be made compulsory in the UK?
- What is the evidence that supports making vaccinations mandatory?
- Would the nursing profession back such a move?

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Rates of childhood vaccination are falling in the UK, sparking calls from some quarters for the introduction of mandatory immunisation. These have now reached the ears of ministers. In our latest focus article, Nursing Times explores the rationale behind making immunisation compulsory and asks whether nurses would support such a move.

Health secretary Matt Hancock has recently said he thinks there is a “strong argument” for mandatory immunisation for schoolchildren, while a new government strategy on immunisation for schoolchildren, while a new government strategy on immunisation is due to be published very soon.

Speaking during the Conservative Party conference in September, he said: “I think there’s a very strong argument for having compulsory vaccinations for children when they go to school, because otherwise they’re putting other children at risk.” He added that he thought the “public would back” such a move.

His comments were sparked by new figures showing that uptake across all routine childhood vaccinations had declined in 2018-19 compared with the previous year. According to NHS Digital’s Childhood Vaccination Coverage Statistics, England was below the 95% coverage recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) on all except one of its measurements.

Coverage for the first dose of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine in those aged two stood at 90.3% in 2018-19, falling from 91.2% in 2017-18 and marking the fifth consecutive year that uptake had decreased in England. Things are better in the rest of the UK, with Wales at 94.5% and Scotland and Northern Ireland above the WHO’s 95% target threshold. However, this summer the

WHO removed the UK’s “measles-free” status – just three years after virus levels were low enough for it to be considered eliminated.

As is to be expected on a controversial topic, the nursing profession appears to have mixed views on mandatory vaccination. Two snap social-media polls, carried out by Nursing Times in response to Mr Hancock’s comments, suggested more nurses were in favour of compulsory immunisation than against (below).

However, the reverse is true when it comes to those prepared to go on the record. One general practice nurse who supports moving to compulsory childhood jabs is Carol Webley-Brown, who works for One Health

Lewisham. She argued it had to be the next step as she had seen first-hand the “devastating” consequences that could await children who were unvaccinated.

“It’s horrible to dictate that your child has to have their injections but, at the end of the day, the benefits outweigh that,” she told Nursing Times.

Three babies in Lewisham have developed meningitis in the last four years and, as a result, they had limbs that did not form properly or had to be amputated because of that infection, she noted.

Ms Webley-Brown said she “would do anything” to try and increase vaccination uptake and was “all for” mandating. “I know a lot of my colleagues may not agree with me, and even the children’s nurses might not agree with me, but 1 do these injections every day.”

She compared the issue to the law on wearing seatbelts. “I remember when people didn’t wear safety belts in their cars and the horrendous injuries I saw,” she said.

“Since being made to belt up, we don’t see those injuries any more. We don’t even think about it, we just get in a car and belt up – I think it should be the same for vaccinations.”

Ms Webley-Brown said she believed parents would be receptive of the change if it was implemented by the government, but she feared some would face problems taking time off work and accessing immunisation appointments. “If the government was to move that way, more opportunities need to be provided to mothers as it can be really hard for them, especially if they have more than one child,” she noted.

Up to 93% of parents view nurses and other health staff as the most trusted source of immunisation advice, according to survey results published earlier this year by
Public Health England. However, some in the profession have warned that the trust between frontline nurses and parents could be broken if vaccinations were to become mandatory.

Helen Donovan, professional lead for public health at the Royal College of Nursing, said her fundamental concern about such a move was that it could "backfire". “There are mixed views in the profession but, on the whole, nurses say to me they feel it would break down their trust and their relationship, and their ability to provide information and advice if it was mandatory,” she said.

She added that nurses had raised concerns with her over what they were expected to say to parents who still opposed vaccinating their child. “One of the things I say to people when I’m trying to give them some practical tips on how to have those conversations is, ‘keep the door open and make sure the lines of communication are kept ongoing’,” she said. “And that’s tricky if you’re then turning around and saying; ‘well, actually it’s the law, you’ve got to do it.’”

Ms Donovan has previously said the key to addressing falling child immunisation rates was increasing the nursing workforce, rather than making vaccinations compulsory. Mandatory immunisation ‘might seem like an obvious solution, but I think we need to be very cautious because it could backfire’, she said.

Echoing similar concerns, professor of children’s health Helen Bedford, said she was worried that introducing compulsory vaccinations could “jeopardise” the relationship between health professionals and parents. “Most people say they get their information about immunisation from health professionals and they trust them,” she said. “We don’t want to jeopardise that trusting relationship.”

For parents who were unsure whether to vaccinate their child, introducing mandatory vaccinations could make them “more resistant”, she warned. Professor Bedford, who is a nurse by background and works at University College London Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, noted that most under-immunisation occurred as parents faced barriers in accessing services, not because they were rejecting the vaccinations.

She argued it would be “unfair” to bring in a law for mandatory vaccinations with some parents still finding it difficult to access appointments. She said making vaccination services more accessible, giving all parents reminders and making advice more readily available, would “go a long way to improve uptake”.

“Put the resources in – if that doesn’t work then maybe think about mandatory,” she said. “Going down the path of mandatory first, when we’re not doing all these other things, is not appropriate and not a good use of resources.”

Some countries, including the US, Australia, France and Italy, have already implemented some form of mandatory vaccination policy for children. Evidence on whether such policies were effective was described as “a bit thin” by Professor Bedford.

“If you introduce it, you tend to get a bit of an increase by a few per cent – but that could just be because you have to put in place better services,” she said. “It might not be down to mandating per say, it might be all the things you do to improve the system.”

Meanwhile, the Department of Health and Social Care has stood by its pledge to consider mandatory vaccinations. The government recognised that the recent decline in immunisation rates was “extremely concerning,” a spokeswoman told Nursing Times.

“We cannot and will not be complacent about the decline in vaccination rates,” she said. “We are carefully considering a wide range of options, which include mandatory vaccination among others.”

She reiterated that some children missed vaccinations because of the “quality of vaccination or healthcare services, convenience in accessing these services, vaccine availability or, in some cases, complacency or misinformation about vaccines”. Mandating immunisation was “not a ‘silver bullet’ for under-immunisation”, she told Nursing Times. 

Will Durant, the Royal Society for Public Health’s vaccine policy lead, said he was pleased the government was thinking about such “bold measures” but would not support compulsory vaccinations. Mandatory immunisation would need funding, staff training and better service delivery, all of which would boost uptake in the current environment, he noted. “If you were to do those things, you don’t need to make vaccinations mandatory because you’ve already done what would increase uptake,” he added.

The WHO does not usually make recommendations on approaches to immunisation but it does believe countries must strive to “identify and address” barriers preventing children from getting vaccinated on time. WHO spokeswoman Fadéla Chaib said: “It is up to countries to decide how best to achieve high vaccination rates, and what works in one country may not be the best approach elsewhere.”

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