



Department
of Health

From Jane Ellison MP
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The Rt Hon George Howarth MP
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Dear George,

Thank you for your letter of 19 February on behalf of a number of your constituents about the meningococcal B (MenB) vaccination programme.

I recognise your constituents' concerns about protection for older children against group B meningococcal infection. This is a terrible disease which, although rare, can be severely disabling and even fatal.

MenB can be devastating for families. This is why we looked so carefully at the evidence for a free vaccination programme for infants and why in 2015 we became the first country in the world to introduce a national and publicly funded programme using the Bexsero vaccine. The MenB vaccine is first offered to babies at two months of age, with further doses offered when they reach four and 12 months of age.

We understand people's concerns. All vaccination programmes are kept under constant review, but we have to be guided by the very best scientific advice and we will continue to protect the children who are most at risk. The programme is based on advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), the independent expert body that advises ministers on immunisation matters. The JCVI carried out a comprehensive and careful review of evidence in formulating its advice. It recommended a vaccination programme that will protect infants because they are at highest risk, with the peak incidence of MenB being in infants at about five months of age.

The cost of the programme was at the upper limit of what would be considered cost effective, taking into account the exceptional features of meningococcal disease such as the heightened concern of parents. We need to ensure that we make good use of NHS resources. We have reached an agreement with GlaxoSmithKline for supply of the vaccine at a price that represents value for money to the NHS.

As the risk of disease is substantially lower in older children and adults, the JCVI considered that the priority should be the implementation of the primary immunisation programme. The JCVI keeps the eligibility criteria of all vaccination programmes under review and considers new evidence as it becomes available. If the JCVI provides further advice about this or other programmes, we will of course consider it.

Laboratory studies have shown that most vaccinated children respond well to the MenB vaccine. At this stage it is too early to fully assess the impact of the programme, but Public Health England (PHE) is following all MenB cases to determine both the impact of the programme and the breadth of protection (proportion of meningitis B strains covered) and length of protection in those vaccinated children.

The meningitis B vaccine will help provide protection against meningococcal disease group B. However, it is important to be aware that this vaccine does not protect against all causes of group B meningococcal disease, so, unfortunately, some cases of meningitis B can still occur. Evidence suggests that the MenB vaccine protects against between 73 and 88 per cent of group B meningococcal disease strains currently circulating in the UK.

PHE continuously monitors the rates of meningococcal infection in England, and informs the JCVI if there is a change in the pattern of disease. For example, on the advice of the JCVI, we rapidly introduced a vaccine programme against the meningococcal groups A, C, W and Y in August 2015 as part of an emergency response to control a national outbreak of group W meningococcal disease.

There are also other causes of meningitis, so it is vital that parents remain alert to the signs and symptoms of the disease, trust their instincts and seek urgent medical attention if ever there is concern. The signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia are given in the leaflets and other resources that support the immunisation programme.

Your constituents raise concerns about the cost of getting MenB vaccine privately. The Department of Health cannot comment on the price of receiving private vaccinations.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Kind regards

Jane

JANE ELLISON