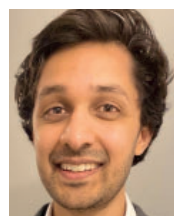


Do doctors have to have the covid-19 vaccine?

Abi Rimmer asks three experts whether all healthcare staff have a duty to be vaccinated



We have a duty to protect patients

Vageesh Jain, public health specialty registrar, University College London

“As it stands, legally, you don’t have to have a covid vaccine. But ethically, clinically, epidemiologically—whichever way you slice it—I would argue you do.

“The ethical case is grounded in the professional duty healthcare workers have to protect their patients: do no harm. Although everyone has the right to decide whether to take a vaccine or not, patients (often elderly or unwell, and therefore vulnerable to covid-19) also have fundamental rights to be protected from avoidable harm. When these principles come into conflict, actions that safeguard the best interests of patients must be favoured.

“Vaccines don’t just protect you and your patients, but the wider population too. Hospitals and community practices are amplifiers of transmission: one or two cases can rapidly proliferate. Outbreaks in institutional settings must therefore be prevented. The best way to do this is through vaccination.

“In the UK, most healthcare workers offered a jab have rolled up their sleeves, but the rate of uptake in some groups, including ethnic minority staff, is low. There is now a legitimate debate taking place on whether to make vaccination mandatory for health workers. If the voluntary approach fails, more restrictive measures may be justified, in which case you would have to have a vaccine.”



We should lead by example

Colin Melville, GMC medical director and director of education and standards

“It’s been an incredibly challenging year with many uncertainties and difficult decisions about patient care, alongside concerns about our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us. The arrival of covid-19 vaccines provides a light at the end of the tunnel.

“Most, if not all, doctors should now have been offered one of the vaccines. And, for most, the benefits are clear. But some may be hesitant, and we’ve received queries from doctors asking what our guidance says about being vaccinated.

“Our advice, set out in our guidance on the professional standards expected of all doctors, says, ‘doctors should be immunised against common serious communicable diseases, unless this is contraindicated.’

“So, while there is no absolute duty to be vaccinated, you must consider the risk of spreading coronavirus to patients, particularly those who are clinically vulnerable. If you have good reason not to be vaccinated, you will need to take appropriate steps to reduce risks to patients and prioritise their safety. And if you’re unsure, please seek appropriate clinical advice to support you in making the decision.

“Choosing to have the vaccine or not is a personal choice dependent on individual circumstances. But at a time when health professionals have never been more valued, we should lead by example.”



If you refuse, prepare to justify why

Rob Hendry, medical director at the Medical Protection Society

“While the vaccination is recommended, it’s not currently mandatory and there are no contractual obligations, so healthcare workers cannot be forced to have it.

“Medical staff who refuse the vaccine should therefore be prepared to justify their decision and, where possible, mitigate any risks. We would encourage healthcare workers who are reluctant or refuse the vaccine to explore their increased risk of repeated exposure to the virus and the benefits of the vaccination with their supervisor and occupational health.

“If the reluctance relates to a health concern, forcing a healthcare worker to receive the vaccine could be seen as unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. If the refusal is because of religious beliefs, this should also be respected under employment laws.

“We would expect an employer to undertake a risk assessment of a healthcare worker who is unwilling or unable to have the vaccination, and consider how risks could be mitigated, such as redeployment to a non-patient facing role, or remote working.

“This would demonstrate what steps have been considered to balance the interests of the individual and others. Ultimately, the viability of any solution must focus on reducing risks and prioritising patient safety. NHS England has set out similar advice for employers with staff refusing the vaccination.”

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