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Why was the NHS logo not protected during referendum campaigns, asks GP?

Vote Leave campaign warned not to use NHS logo

The Vote Leave campaign in the UK referendum on membership of the European Union was repeatedly warned by the Department of Health for England not to use the NHS logo ahead of the vote, an article published in **The BMJ** reveals.

Emails obtained by Dr Paul Thornton, a GP from Nuneaton in Warwickshire, under freedom of information legislation, show that in February 2016 the department's NHS brand and identity team issued warnings to the campaign about using the logo.

Dr Thornton believes it is in the public interest to know why the NHS logo was not protected through the referendum campaigns.

The NHS logo was a prominent part of the Vote Leave campaign. It was displayed on leaflets delivered to homes and on the "Brexit battle bus" that toured the United Kingdom from May 2016, ahead of the referendum on 23 June.

The advertisement on the side of the bus said, "We send the EU £350m a week. Let's fund our NHS instead."

The team's letter to Vote Leave explained that it was "against our guidelines" to use the NHS in this way and that it risked "misleading and confusing the public."

The Vote Leave campaign was asked to amend or remove leaflets containing the NHS logo and to stop their distribution within seven days. This did not occur.

The NHS logo and letters are registered trademarks owned by the secretary of state for health. The NHS said that the current logo, which was introduced in 1999, was recognised by 95% of members of the public and associated with high levels of trust, credibility, and authority.

Dr Thornton said that he had submitted the request because “it was clear that the £350m was not going to go to the health service and that was a deception.” He added, “I knew that the NHS logo was copyrighted. The question was whether the Department of Health had done anything about that.”

Thornton said that he intended to appeal to the information commissioner for further information that was withheld, as he believed it to be in the public interest to know why the NHS logo was not protected through the referendum campaigns.

The Department of Health declined to comment. The BMJ contacted the Vote Leave campaign and the MPs Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, and Gisela Stuart, prominent members of the Vote Leave campaign, for comment but had not received responses by the time of publication.

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Notes to Editors

News: Health department warned Vote Leave campaign not to use NHS logo

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