



NEWS

NHS chief attacks anti-vax “fake news” for falling uptake

Abi Rimmer

The BMJ

NHS England’s chief executive Simon Stevens has hit out at online anti-vaccination material, warning that telling parents not to vaccinate their children was as bad as telling them not to watch them when they crossed the road.

Speaking at the Nuffield Trust health policy summit on 1 March, Stevens said, “Across the world two to three million lives are saved each year by vaccination but as part of the fake news movement the vaccination deniers are getting some traction.

“Last year, for example, we saw triple the number of measles cases across England that we had seen the year before, despite the fact that clearly vaccination works.”

Stevens said that over the past five years there had been a steady decline in vaccination uptake which meant that the government had to continue to win over the public on what he described as “very effective and important health interventions.”

“We are not being helped on this front by the fact that although nine in 10 parents say they support vaccination, half of them also say that they have seen fake messages around vaccination on social media,” Stevens said.

Stevens’ comments follow warnings from Unicef that the number of measles cases around the world jumped by 48.4%

last year and is still climbing. It blamed the rise on inadequate vaccine coverage caused partly by misinformation.¹

Stevens said that telling parents not to vaccinate their children was as irresponsible as saying to them, “Don’t bother, when taking your kids to primary school, looking which way they cross the road.”

Stevens then went on to read out a message from a Whatsapp group for parents at his own daughter’s primary school which said, “My kids aren’t vulnerable and I think loading up on vaccines blocks their systems from fighting disease as it should do.”

He said that the government had a responsibility to explain to parents that vaccines not only benefit their own children but other children as well through herd immunity.

“The fact that the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine uptake for five year olds is 87.5%, against the 95% that it should be, is a real problem,” he said.

1 Dyer O. Measles: alarming worldwide surge seriously threatens children, says UN. *BMJ* 2019;364:l981. 10.1136/bmj.l981 30824412