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Covid-19 vaccination: GPs ruled out of booster campaign at practice level

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Doctors' leaders have decried a decision not to allow individual GP practices to organise and administer covid-19 vaccination boosters this autumn, saying GPs are being ignored.

NHS England published a letter¹ to GPs on 14 July about changes to the enhanced service package² for phase three of the covid-19 vaccination programme, detailing the arrangements for the vaccination booster to be delivered from September.

The letter says, "We have considered carefully whether we could support the administration of the covid-19 booster vaccines at individual practice level. For a number of reasons this is not operationally feasible."

The reasons given include the supply chain being unable to support deliveries to all practice sites and vaccine characteristics potentially needing "at scale working."

"For these reasons, practices that wish to participate in the booster programme will need to do so as part of a primary care network (PCN) grouping," says the letter.

The approach was criticised by the BMA which has been calling for covid vaccinations to be more accessible at individual practice level.

BMA GP committee chair Richard Vautrey said, "GPs want and expect to be involved in the covid-19 booster programme this autumn; it gives patients confidence they can get their booster through their local surgery—especially if this can be done at the same time as flu jabs. Doctors and their teams should be given support and flexibility to take part in a way that works best for their patients.

"It's frustrating to see NHS England once again disregard the voice of hardworking GPs—specifically by not doing more to enable all practices to give vaccinations from within their own premises if that's what they wish to do.

"If they were able to do so, it could limit the impact of the booster campaign on other important GP services. It would also mean GPs and their teams could offer opportunistic vaccinations to patients attending with other illnesses."

NHS England has stressed that GPs can be involved and the guidance says that practices have until 28 July to notify their clinical commissioning group of their willingness to participate in phase three of the campaign.

The letter says, "General practice has been a vital part of this historic programme and we are grateful to everyone involved." Nevertheless, practice level delivery of the programme has been ruled out.

The letter also explains that under the new arrangements, the lead practice for a PCN grouping would receive £12.58 (€14.74; \$17.4) per dose given, with a £10 supplement for jabs given in other settings such as care homes or to housebound patients.

Vautrey told *The BMJ*, "The flu vaccine campaign is part of our business as usual. It's what we do every year and practices factor in their staffing and working arrangements around all the other commitments. We want to be able to link the covid booster campaign with the flu campaign in our practices because that's the most effective and efficient way of delivering it." There was likely to be a better uptake of both flu and covid booster vaccinations if they were both provided at practices, he argued.

Despite the fact that it had not yet been confirmed that it was safe to administer a flu and a covid vaccination at the same time, Vautrey said, "I hope and expect that the outcome of ongoing trials will be that co-administration will be possible."

- 1 NHS England. General practice enhanced service specification for phase 3 of the covid-19 vaccination programme. Letter. 14 July 2021. www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2021/07/C1351-Letter-to-GPs-Phase-3-opt-in.pdf.
- 2 NHS England. Enhanced service specification: covid-19 vaccination programme: phase3 2021/22. 14 July 2021. www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2021/07/C1349-Phase-3-GP-Enhanced-Service-Specification.pdf.

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