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NHS psychologist died after rare reaction to AstraZeneca vaccine, rules coroner

Clare Dyer

A “fit and healthy” NHS clinical psychologist who was among the first to be given the AstraZeneca covid-19 vaccine in January 2021 died because of a rare reaction to it, a coroner has ruled.

Stephen Wright, 32, a father of two who worked in Bexley, south-east London, was among the health service staff who received the vaccine, Vaxzevria, soon after it was rolled out. His mother told the BBC that he had been about to take up a job at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London the week after he died.

Senior coroner Andrew Harris told Southwark coroner’s court, “Dr Wright was a fit and healthy man who had the AstraZeneca covid vaccination on 16 January 2021, awoke with a headache on the 25th and later developed left arm numbness. He attended an emergency department just after midnight, where he was found to have high blood pressure and a sagittal sinus venous thrombosis.

“He was transferred to King’s College Hospital at 6:39 am but, because of the extent of the bleed and very low platelets, was unfit for surgery, dying at 6:33 pm. My conclusion as to the cause of death is unintended complications of vaccination.”

The AstraZeneca vaccine will appear on Wright’s death certificate as part of the causes of death, but Harris added, “It is important to record as fact that it is the AstraZeneca vaccine, but that is different from blaming AstraZeneca.”

Wright’s widow, Charlotte Wright, who had been trying to get the original “natural causes” wording on her husband’s death certificate changed, is among dozens of claimants taking legal action against AstraZeneca.¹ She told the BBC, “It was made clear that Stephen was fit and healthy and that his death was by vaccination. For us, it allows us to be able to continue our litigation against AstraZeneca. This is the written proof.” She said the coroner’s ruling “provides relief but it doesn’t provide closure. I think we’re only going to get that when we have an answer from AstraZeneca and the government.”

In April 2021 the UK government advised that under-30s should receive an alternative to the AstraZeneca vaccine, after the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) found that there was evidence of a link to rare blood clots with low platelet levels. The following month the advice was extended to cover the under-40s.²

A spokesperson for AstraZeneca said, “We are saddened by Stephen Wright’s death and extend our deepest sympathies to his family for their loss. Patient safety is our highest priority and regulatory authorities have clear and stringent standards to ensure the safe use of all medicines, including vaccines.

“From the body of evidence in clinical trials and real world data, Vaxzevria has continuously been shown to have an acceptable safety profile and regulators around the world consistently state that the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks of extremely rare potential side effects. The MHRA granted conditional marketing approval for Vaxzevria for the UK based on the safety profile and efficacy of the vaccine.”

1 Dyer C. Patients launch legal action against AstraZeneca over its covid-19 vaccine. *BMJ* 2023;380. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p725 pmid: 36977518

2 Mahase E. Covid-19: UK offers under 40s alternative to AstraZeneca vaccine to boost confidence. *BMJ* 2021;373. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1185 pmid: 33972259