

indie_SAGE

5th October 2021

Dear Professor Pollard

I am writing to you on behalf of Independent SAGE in your role as chair of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). I am also copying this letter to Professor Lim Wei Shen as Chair of COVID-19 Immunisation for the JCVI.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges to the country and the scientific community. After some initial difficulties, it was established that complete transparency about the evidence upon which policy decisions were being made was an important, indeed crucial, element of retaining the confidence of the public in general and the scientific and clinical community. The adoption of transparency and openness, for instance in the regular publishing of SAGE minutes and documents, has proven to be an essential vehicle for scrutinising and improving decision-making.

As you are only too aware, vaccination has already proven itself to be a substantial contribution to the achievement of control of COVID-19. With a weekly toll in the region of 1000 deaths, efforts to reduce this burden of avoidable mortality will be significantly aided by the broadest possible use of the approved vaccines.

The JCVI's code of practice states that it 'is committed to making as much of its work open to public scrutiny as possible'. Independent Sage is deeply concerned that openness and transparency are absent in the operation of the JCVI on COVID-19 vaccination, particularly in respect of children and young people. Such transparency is vital for public acceptability of vaccination programmes, which is a critical determinant of their success.

The JCVI code of practice states that the committee aims to publish JCVI meeting agendas minutes, statements, and committee papers, and JCVI sub-committee minutes and papers. The code of practice also states that the agenda for a JCVI meeting is published about one week before the meeting and that draft minutes are published within six weeks of the committee meetings.

We note that the most recent set of JCVI minutes to be published is for a meeting on 22nd June 2021, a meeting at which COVID-19 vaccination did not appear as an item on the agenda. The most recent JCVI meeting discussing COVID-19 vaccination for which minutes are available is from 16 February 2021.

The failure of the JCVI to abide by its code of practice is particularly egregious in respect of recent statements on COVID-19 vaccinations for 12- to 17-year-olds. The statements are not linked to JCVI meetings for which agendas and minutes are available. They are also

unsupported by papers explaining how the committee reached its view, the full range of evidence they considered, including detailed risk-benefit studies, and their assumptions.

Independent SAGE urges JCVI to abide by its code of practice and be open and transparent through rapid publishing of all agendas, supporting papers and minutes of its committee and sub-committee meetings.

Public confidence in vaccination programmes is assisted by clear and consistent processes and messaging. In that spirit, we wish to have a public assurance from JCVI that all future considerations of COVID-19 vaccines, including the extension of vaccination to children under 12 years of age, will be conducted openly and transparently.

In accordance with these principles, we will place this letter on our website.

Yours sincerely

Professor Deenan Pillay, Chair, Independent SAGE

On behalf of Independent SAGE members:

Professor Gabriel Scally, Professor Anthony Costello , Professor Karl Friston, Dr Zubaida Haque, Professor Martin McKee, Professor Susan Michie, Dr Tolu Oni, Professor Christina Pagel, Professor Stephen Reicher, Dr Helen Salisbury, Dr Kit Yates