

Schools block vaccine on religious grounds

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A Hindu academy chain has blocked delivery of flu vaccinations in its schools, including those with no faith ethos, on religious grounds.

Explaining their decision in a letter to parents this November, the headteacher of Avanti Gardens School, said: "The use of pork gelatine in several of the vaccines used by the NHS is an issue for the MAT Board given the faith designation of many of AST's (Avanti Schools Trust) schools."

Porcine gelatine is an essential stabiliser in the Fluenz and Tetra nasal sprays used for children's flu vaccines.

The School Age Immunisation Services (SAIS) are responsible for delivering vaccinations, including for the flu and Covid-19, to children in this age range.

In 151 out of 152 local authorities in England, SAIS is delivered primarily through schools. Pupils in unregistered schools and schools that refuse to engage with the programme are particularly vulnerable to missing out. This disproportionately affects pupils from minority, particularly Jewish and Muslim, backgrounds.

The National Secular Society has urged the Department for Education to ensure that all pupils have equal access to in-school vaccination. In recent correspondence with DfE the NSS asked what steps are being taken to ensure delivery of vaccination and immunisation programmes in schools are not hampered by religious objections.

In response, schools minister Baroness Barran said "Where the department is alerted to schools continuing to refuse to participate with SAIS teams for an in-school offer, we will make enquiries as to the rationale behind this, and discuss ways to overcome any hesitancy."

The minister also advised parents concerned about faith schools objecting to the vaccine to talk to their local SAIS provider.

NSS comment

The National Secular Society's head of education, Alastair Lichten, said:

"It's concerning to see religious organisations undermining public health decisions in school. This impedes vaccination take up, contributes to vaccine misinformation and hesitancy, and disadvantages families attending schools under religious control, irrespective of their own beliefs.

"Cases like this also demonstrate how faith-based decisions are being imposed in non-faith schools through academisation."

Notes

- The NSS raised first concerns with the DfE in 2019 after receiving anecdotal evidence that some faith schools were refusing to engage with SIAS.
- According to the parent who originally shared their concerns, the policy was still in place at the end of term.

- The government do not hold data on individual schools' engagement with vaccination programs. There may be practical reasons why specific schools are not suitable locations for SIAS teams.
- At least one Avanti school in Hertfordshire is being used as a Covid walk in centre, although it is not clear whether the trust's decision not to support the SIAS extends to their Covid-19 programme for which pupils in four of their schools are currently eligible.
- Earlier this year the National Secular Society raised concerns with the Education and Skills Funding Agency that Avanti Schools Trust was [failing to protect the ethos of non-faith schools](#)

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The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

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