

Campaign to persuade parents that the MMR jab is safe

By Celia Hall, Medical Editor

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A £3 MILLION advertising campaign is being launched by the Government to persuade parents, doctors and nurses that the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine MMR is safe and effective.

Prof Liam Donaldson, Chief Medical Officer for England, called a summit yesterday at which representatives of leading medical and nursing organisations reassessed the evidence on MMR.

Prof Donaldson said: "There is parental anxiety. I understand and I sympathise. It is up to us to address their concerns and get the facts in front of people in a way that is easy to understand. We have re-examined the way we are giving information and we may need a little more care in the way we deliver the messages."

The meeting was held after the publication of scientific reviews that said that the vaccine had been introduced too quickly and not tested enough. The vaccine has been linked to the [development of bowel disease and autism in children](#). Vaccination levels have fallen to 88 per cent from more than 90 per cent and as low as 75 per cent in southern England. Doctors fear an epidemic.

The Department of Health has rejected the suggestion that the vaccine was introduced prematurely. It said it was the safest method available and would not allow single, one at a time doses of the vaccines to be made available.

But accepting that some parents and doctors have not been convinced by their arguments the department called on Dr Miriam Stoppard, the author and broadcaster, for advice. Dr Stoppard said she had told the meeting that they used too much medical language.

She said: "Scientists tend to prefer to use figures, statistics, averages, incidence rates, mortality rates, which to many people is jargon and very often scientists and politicians lose their audience. I do have a great deal of sympathy for parents' fears and we would like to reassure them."

Dr Liam Fox, the shadow health secretary, backed the campaign but said it came too late to have the desired impact. The latest drive by the department follows a paper published at the weekend by Dr Andrew Wakefield, a consultant gastroenterologist at the Royal Free Hospital, London who first raised the possibility of a link between the MMR vaccine, an inflammatory bowel disorder and autism, three years ago.

Yesterday Stephen Evans, a member of the Medicines Control Agency, which advises the Government, said the new review of the research was "flawed, contained a number of errors of fact and had not been completely peer reviewed". Britain's chief medical officers agreed yesterday that a newspaper campaign would begin on Thursday and a month-long television advertising push aimed at mothers of young children would start next month.

Information packs would be sent to 30,000 GPs, health visitors and nurses to persuade them that the jab was safe. Richard Miles, whose son Robert, now 12, is diagnosed with autistic enterocolitis and is among the 500 families planning to sue manufacturers, said: "Dr Wakefield is not a lone voice. The Government's attitude is arrogant in the extreme. There has been no mention from them of the 2,000 families involved in this."

Isabella Thomas, of the vaccine safety campaign JABS, who blames the

autism suffered by her two sons on MMR inoculations, said: "Nobody has come to us asking us about it. We need proper evidence."

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