Statement of support for MMR

MMR – Getting to grips with the facts

This statement supporting the use of the MMR vaccine has been endorsed by the following organisations.

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Royal College of General Practitioners

Royal College of Nursing

Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association

Faculty of Public Health Medicine

British Medical Association

Department of Health

All of us who work in the NHS and the independent professional bodies concerned with children’s health have a duty to minimise risk when advising on tests or treatments. We minimise risk by ensuring that recommended medicinal products and vaccines have undergone careful tests and trials. This allows doctors, nurses and health visitors to be confident that they are recommending and using the safest and most effective vaccines to protect our children from disease.

If you are the parent or grandparent of a young child, you may be concerned about the recent stories casting doubt on the safety of MMR immunisation, and the suggestion that having the measles, mumps and rubella vaccines separately would be safer.

Doubts about the safety of MMR vaccine have centred on two questions. Is there a link between MMR and autism? And would separate vaccines be safer than MMR?

Does MMR cause autism?

Autism was well known long before MMR was used in this country. More cases of autism are being reported now, but the increase started before MMR was introduced and there was no step change in autism rates when MMR immunisation started.
It has been suggested that there is a new condition of regressive autism with bowel symptoms, and that this has something to do with MMR. This has been studied and we know that the proportion of autistic children with regression is the same whether they have had MMR or not. This does not support the theory that MMR has caused their regression.

Despite what the stories say, there has not been a single study that has shown a risk of MMR causing autism. But, there have been many studies that cannot find a link. The weight of scientific evidence strongly indicates that MMR does not cause autism.

**Was MMR properly tested?**

MMR was thoroughly tested before it was introduced. There was more than a decade of experience in the US before it was used in the UK. Over 90 countries have introduced MMR vaccine and more than 500 million doses have been used. The World Health Organisation has recognised MMR as 'a highly effective vaccine with such an outstanding safety record'.

**Aren't more studies needed before we can be sure that MMR does not cause autism?**

As each concern about MMR and autism and bowel disease has been raised, studies have shown those fears to be groundless. In its recent review of the causes of autism, the American Academy of Pediatrics considered around 1000 scientific papers, and concluded that the evidence did not support a link between MMR and autism. The US Institute of Medicine and the UK Medical Research Council came to similar conclusions on the lack of evidence to link MMR and autism. More research is needed into what causes autism but the scientific evidence does not support a link between MMR and autism.

**Have the case notes been examined of children with autism whose parents feel the vaccine has caused their condition?**

After requests from the lawyers acting for parents, the Committee on Safety of Medicines set up a group of independent experts to look at these cases. Their parents sent in reports, and the children's medical details were obtained from their specialists. The experts carefully reviewed the case histories of more than 100 children. They concluded that there was no syndrome in these children linked with MMR.

**Why not give parents the choice of single vaccines?**

Using single vaccines would mean that:

- six separate injections have to be given over a long period of time;
- there would be a fall in vaccine coverage as experience shows more children would not complete the course of injections;
- children who complete the course are left without protection in the gaps between injections;
- babies may catch the disease from their older brothers and sisters who are unprotected between the separate injections;
- children who cannot have the MMR vaccine, such as those having treatment for cancer, would be more exposed to infection; and
- pregnant women will be at greater risk of rubella infection from their own unprotected children and the children of their friends.

The evidence shows that MMR is a safe and effective vaccine that is not linked to autism. More than 90 countries in the world use MMR and hundreds of millions of children have been protected by this vaccine for nearly 30 years.

**Might MMR overload an immature immune system?**

Children's immune systems cope very well with multiple challenges from birth. It has been estimated that the immune system of a young child has the capacity to respond to 10,000 different immune challenges at the same time and has enormous reserves to cope with combined vaccinations. The three viruses in the MMR vaccine do not all have their effects at the same time: each virus has a different incubation period, just like the natural infections, so the body does not have to react to all three simultaneously.

We believe that our duty as health professionals is to give advice and treatments based on sound evidence. We want to provide children with the safest and most effective protection from disease. The evidence is there for all to see. Immunisation using MMR is safer and more effective than the use of single vaccines. Choosing single vaccines is a higher risk option for our children and that is why we will continue to recommend MMR.