



What are the pros and cons of Covid Vaccine passports?

Written by Natalie Grover Science correspondent

Sun 14 Feb 2021



15 million people in the UK have now been vaccinated. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Desperate to return to pre-pandemic normality, many countries where vaccination campaigns for Covid-19 are in full swing are considering endorsing “**vaccine passports**” to reignite international travel and reopen economies.

A week ago, the UK government ruled out plans for such passports – with **vaccine minister Nadhim Zahawi** calling them “discriminatory” – but on Sunday, the foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, said the documents were “under consideration”. Labour politicians have advocated their introduction, with the former prime minister Tony Blair making the case for domestic vaccine passports in this week’s Mail on Sunday. So what are the pros and cons of such “immunity certificates”?

The arguments for

Incentive They could serve as a powerful motivation for people to get vaccinated. However, David Archard, the chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, argues that they are not necessarily a proportionate way to achieve vaccine compliance, which can be better secured by providing greater and more accurate information to people.

Opportunities By getting a certificate, some individuals who have been deprived of access to certain work opportunities by the pandemic could benefit. “And that’s important,” says Archard. “After all, what we’ve dealt with for the last year are considerable restrictions on the freedoms of the population, and here’s one way in which individuals might now be able to get back those basic freedoms that are greatly valuable to them.”

Travel The passports could also offer value in terms of international travel – being vaccinated means you will be unlikely to suffer from severe Covid-19 disease that might require hospitalisation abroad. Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia, says that if a country’s hospitals are already grappling with high levels of Covid-19, “they don’t want people coming out on holiday from Britain, and then going down with Covid and adding to the burden on their health services. [If you are vaccinated,] you are unlikely to get sick with Covid-19 while you are there, either [because] you brought it into the country or [because] you picked it up in the first week of the holiday.”

The arguments against

Science While the vaccines being deployed have shown to have impressive efficacy in reducing the risk of hospitalisation and death for symptomatic Covid-19, at this point there is no concrete evidence that they can thwart transmission, scientists say. “So there is a danger of simply assuming because you’ve been vaccinated, you don’t then spread Covid-19, and that would not be a good scientific basis for a policy of passports,” Archard says.

Variants Most countries are in the early stages of the vaccine rollout, and given concerns about the impact of existing variants – in particular the one discovered in South Africa – on the ability of vaccines to offer protection, it would be premature to introduce the passport system, says Archard. “I think we’re about halfway through the first half, and we don’t want to start introducing red and yellow cards quite yet. We want to head on into the second half and see if we can see how it’s working.”

Discrimination Such passports will be used to give people who are vaccinated and presumed to have immunity the ability to do things that others cannot. Given that the vaccine rollout is based on a priority system, some people will be vaccinated before others. Others who choose not to get vaccinated despite being offered the vaccine may also lose out on opportunities. There is a danger of stigmatising individuals who lack certification, and Archard suggests you may also penalise people who are already at a disadvantage because of certain inequalities.

Fraud The passports could encourage people who have not been vaccinated yet or have chosen not to be vaccinated to get certification on the black market, according to Hunter. So if passports are adopted, he says, “it has to be done in a way that is not subject to fraud”.

Privacy Typically, health information such as vaccination records is stored by the NHS. These passports could mean that data is shared with outside companies, says Archard. “Could it be used in ways that are unfair, that are stigmatising, and that are prejudicial to the interests of individuals? Exactly how it is put into practical effect would also raise reasonable ethical concerns that would need to be addressed.”

Weblink: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/14/what-pros-and-cons-covid-vaccine-passports-immunity-certificates-travel>