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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

COVID-19 VACCINE: 2023 AUTUMN BOOSTERS AND ME/CFS

In view of the fact that people with ME/CFS have a disease that is likely to be exacerbated (or put into relapse) by any new infection, I wrote to the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, in 2022 to ask him to make it clear that people with ME/CFS can have an autumn Covid-19 booster vaccine if they choose to have one.

The response from the CMO, as set out below, confirms that doctors can use their clinical judgement to prescribe a Covid-19 vaccine booster to their patients who have ME/CFS.

Background information:

The current eligibility criteria for being classified as clinically vulnerable to Covid-19 is set out in chapter 14a of the NHS Green Book:

<https://tinyurl.com/mtycnd5k>

The Green Book guidance states that people who have a chronic neurological disease (table 3, page 25), and those who have an underlying health condition that could be exacerbated by catching Covid-19 (paragraph 1, page 21), should be regarded as clinically vulnerable.

The Green Book makes it clear that the list of specific neurological conditions in table 3 are examples and this list does not exclude other neurological conditions.

ME/CFS meets both of these Green Book eligibility criteria because:

1. ME/CFS is classified as a neurological disease in SNOMED-CT and by the World Health Organisation in ICD10 (G93:3). This classification is recognised by the NHS and NICE.

SNOMED coding:

52702003 - Chronic fatigue syndrome - SNOMED CT

Information about the SNOMED CT code 52702003 representing Chronic fatigue syndrome.

<https://tinyurl.com/48f5zp5p>

2. ME/CFS can produce similar adverse effects on quality of life as other chronic neurological conditions such as MS.

3. Patient evidence collected over the past 3 years confirming that many people with ME/CFS have suffered a significant and sometimes persisting relapse of their ME/CFS symptoms after catching Covid-19.

4. The new NICE guideline on ME/CFS (in 1.14.5) states that an acute illness is one of the main causes of relapse of ME/CFS:

<https://tinyurl.com/mwyx22j6>



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5. There is growing research evidence to confirm that a significant proportion of people who catch Covid-19 infection develop a form of Long Covid that also meets diagnostic criteria for ME/CFS.

Research references:

<https://tinyurl.com/2bde334n>

<https://tinyurl.com/2p6n8syz>

2022 Correspondence with the Chief Medical Officer: The private secretary to the CMO replied as follows:

“The primary purpose of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to provide protection from serious illness for those at higher risk of severe COVID-19. This has been the case throughout the programme, and remains so this autumn.

“The vaccines provide good protection against severe disease from variant strains of Covid-19, including Omicron, but protection against infection and mild disease is lower and more short-lived.

“The JCVI take into account a wide range of data and analysis covering the risk from COVID-19 to groups - e.g. age or condition. They always welcome new data, and take that into account when updating their advice, which they review regularly.

“The symptoms of ME/CFS are diverse, and can be very debilitating.

“The examples given in the Green Book are not exhaustive, and, within these groups, a prescriber should apply clinical judgment to take into account the risk of COVID-19 exacerbating any underlying disease that a patient may have, as well as the risk of serious illness from COVID-19 itself.

“Those who are unsure if they should be considered for vaccination due to a medical condition not listed in the Green Book should contact their GP and/or consultant to discuss their particular situation.

“Where a doctor has assessed a patient, and determined that individual is of the same risk from COVID as those conditions explicitly listed in the Green Book, that they can prescribe the vaccine.

“This would apply to ME/CFS in the same way it applies to all conditions not specifically listed in the Green Book.”

Conclusion:

Doctors are able to use their clinical judgement to prescribe a Covid-19 vaccine booster to their patients who have ME/ CFS and would like to have this protection. We would be grateful if particular consideration can be given to those with ME/ CFS who are severely and very severely affected, are house-bound or bed-bound, and deemed to be at most risk.

Yours sincerely

Dr Charles Shepherd

Hon Medical Adviser, The ME Association
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