

Call for probe on meningitis death 'demands answers'

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Concerned politicians are pressing the Scottish Health Minister for more information on possible adverse reactions to the meningitis C vaccine after The Observer's revelations last week that parents were being denied access to statistics.

New figures released last week revealed that there have been 12 associated deaths, including that of 14-year-old schoolboy footballer Keith MacGregor from Inverurie in Aberdeenshire, who died in March five days after being vaccinated.

Brian Adam, Scottish Nationalist MSP for North West Scotland and a biochemist, tabled a parliamentary question asking if there was an independent probe into Keith's death.

The question is one of six he tabled on Friday evening. Adam also asked for details of meningitis cases in Scotland this year and of the number of adverse reactions to the vaccine recorded north of the border.

He also asked where clinical trials of the vaccine were done, whether other countries approved it, and why NHS accounting procedures for the vaccine differ from standard practice.

'I have no desire to create a scare. Meningitis C is a serious source of infection and steps to reduce the risk are welcome,' said Adam. 'But we would be failing in our duties if we did not investigate as far as possible.'

Kay Ullrich, the SNP Shadow Health Minister, plans to table questions about the vaccine on Monday. She will ask whether GPs were warned not to give the vaccine to any vulnerable groups after the Medicines Control agency was told some patients who had been injected suffered heart problems and convulsions.

Factfile

What is meningitis? It is an inflammation of the meninges, or the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by a range of bacteria, the most notorious of which is the meningococcus, and by various viruses. Bacterial meningitis

is the most serious, with symptoms including vomiting, fever and rashes, possibly resulting in death.

Victoria Beckham has the viral form of the disease

What is the new vaccine for? It covers the meningococcal Group C infection, which is responsible for four out of 10 cases of meningococcal meningitis, and is most closely associated with outbreaks among young teenagers. It is being offered to all those aged under 18 across the country. It offers no protection against the B infection.

How effective does the Government say it is? The Government said that it has cut cases by 85 per cent. Official figures show that in the 15-17-year-old group, in the past 12 weeks, six cases of the disease were reported compared with 26 in the same period last year

How effective is it really? There have been 587 cases since the beginning of the year, compared to 713 in the same period last year, a drop of 18 per cent. In London, East Anglia and the West Midlands, there has even been a rise in cases.

What are the risks? GPs have reported 16,527 adverse reactions.

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