Science and Health

By Rachel Kayani

Children should be vaccinated against Chickenpox
Researchers are advising that all children should be routinely vaccinated against Chickenpox. Chickenpox is generally thought of as an irritating illness most often caught in childhood, but it can have serious complications in a small number of people, and researchers are therefore saying that the only way to prevent serious illness and deaths is to vaccinate all children.

The Department of Health is currently awaiting a report on whether the vaccine should be introduced in England, following the recommendation by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. However, the introduction of another vaccine has been criticised by some campaigners who feel that the childhood vaccination programme is already too congested and children’s immune systems are being overloaded.

Most people will have experienced Chickenpox first hand as a child, and whilst it can be unpleasant, recovery is usually fairly swift. But for every 1,000 children who catch Chickenpox, on average between two and five of them will end up in hospital – and in some cases complications set in and deaths occur. Certain groups are also known to be more vulnerable to the disease including neonates, adults, pregnant women and the immuno-compromised. However, vaccines themselves can carry potential side effects and campaigners are saying that the risks associated with the disease versus the risks from the vaccination itself need to be properly assessed to demonstrate the clear benefit of a routine vaccination. Instead there are suggestions that the vaccine only be offered to vulnerable groups.

A Chickenpox vaccine has been introduced in Canada, Australia, Finland and the USA. America is using a four-in-one vaccine of measles, mumps, rubella and chickenpox, and a similar vaccine schedule has been proposed in England, but health advisers are worried that parents who are already suspicious of the MMR would not support a quadruple vaccine. Other options could be to introduce it as a single vaccine. Another is to offer it to teenagers who have not had chickenpox, to prevent the risk of developing complications from the disease as an adult, when the disease is often worse. The Government has commissioned an expert group to assess all the scientific and medical data before it makes its decision.

Drugs may not be the answer to ADHD
The long term effectiveness of drugs to treat children with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) has been called into question. A team of American Scientists who conducted a study into the effectiveness of drug therapy for children with ADHD found that while drugs such as Ritalin and Concerta can work well in the short term, over a three-year period they brought about no demonstrable improvement in children’s behaviour. They also found the drugs could stunt growth.

The scientists have been monitoring 600 children in the USA since the 1990s. In 1999 they reported that, after 1 year,
medication worked better than behavioural therapy for children with ADHD. Following this, the number of prescriptions for Ritalin and Concerta increased dramatically, with prescription rates in the UK increasing threefold. Last year, GPs in the UK prescribed ADHD drugs such as Ritalin and Concerta to around 55,000 children at a cost of £28m to the NHS. The recent research that drug regimes are not effective after 3 years was an unexpected finding and is the subject of a BBC Panorama programme. The report’s co-author, Professor William Pelham, of the University of Buffalo, said: “I think we exaggerated the beneficial impact of medication in the first study. We had thought that children medicated longer would have better outcomes. That didn’t happen to be the case.” The study also found that children on the medication had a substantial decrease in growth compared to other children. In conclusion, the authors said that whilst medication does appear to have a beneficial impact on the child’s behaviour in the short-term there does not appear to be a long-term benefit, which parents need to be made aware of. The future for treating children and families affected by this disorder is unclear but new treatment guidelines will be published in the UK next year.

News and Views of Muslims in the United Kingdom