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UK Pushes Back Against Vaccine Misinformation After Measles Death

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A recent child's death linked to measles has triggered renewed calls across the United Kingdom to improve vaccination rates, as health officials confront an alarming rise in anti-vaccine misinformation circulating on social media, much of it traced to foreign influence.

Measles, a highly contagious virus, remains preventable through the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine, typically administered in two doses during early childhood. Despite

the proven safety and effectiveness of the MMR vaccine, uptake in some UK regions remains far below the 95% threshold recommended by the World Health Organisation to maintain herd immunity. In Liverpool, for instance, full vaccination coverage is reportedly as low as 74%, with some neighbourhoods seeing rates below 50%.

The UK Health Security Agency has ramped up efforts to counteract vaccine myths, especially in the wake of the confirmed death. Though details remain limited, the child was reportedly treated at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool before succumbing to measles and other health complications. British officials stress that misinformation about vaccine safety is undermining public health.

Public health leaders have condemned misleading claims made by social media influencers who assert that measles is not dangerous or that vaccines are unproven. Influencer Ellie Grey, who has a substantial online following, denied that the child's death was caused by measles in a widely shared video. Another figure, Kate Shemirani—a former nurse barred from practice repeated false assertions that vaccines are ineffective. Liverpool's Director of Public Health, Matthew Ashton, criticised such individuals in a statement to the Liverpool Echo, saying those who spread falsehoods “need to take a very long, hard look at themselves.”

Medical professionals are working to set the record straight. Alder Hey Hospital released a video featuring pediatric infectious disease consultant Dr. Andrew McArdle, who debunked lingering myths, including the long-discredited claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism, a theory stemming from a fraudulent 1998 study by former physician Andrew Wakefield. That study has since been fully retracted, and Wakefield was stripped of his medical license.

Benjamin Kasstan-Dabush, a medical anthropologist from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, told Agence France-Presse (AFP) that the fallout from Wakefield's false claims still lingers, now amplified by modern social media channels. According to Kasstan-Dabush, some parents delay vaccinations due to logistical challenges or misleading online content. He also noted the influence of foreign figures like Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a vocal vaccine sceptic whose past advisory role in the United States helped spread anti-vaccine rhetoric globally.

The rise in measles cases is not unique to the UK. Europe recorded its highest case count in more than 25 years in 2023, and the United States is seeing its worst outbreak in three

decades. Even Canada, which declared measles eradicated in 1998, has documented over 3,500 cases this year.

Public health experts emphasise that increasing MMR vaccine uptake is essential to avoid a full-blown crisis. Consultant epidemiologist Vanessa Saliba of the UK Health Security Agency highlighted that vaccines protect not only individuals but also those with compromised immune systems, such as patients undergoing cancer treatment. In her public message, she stressed the importance of community-wide responsibility.

With misinformation spreading faster than ever online, the UK faces a critical public health challenge. Combating baseless conspiracy theories with factual, science-based messaging remains the best defence against preventable illnesses like measles—and the unnecessary tragedies they can cause.