



A: Introduction

1. The Court of Protection team has been asked to advise on a number of occasions as to the legal position in relation to vaccination for COVID-19. What follows is a general discussion, as opposed to legal advice on the facts of individual cases. It primarily relates to the position in England in relation to those aged 18 and above; specific advice should be sought in respect of Wales and those under 18. Reference should also be had to the DSHC's [guidance](#), which is to be updated shortly to address vaccination.
2. Readers may also find useful our rapid response guidance note on testing, available [here](#).

B: The context

3. Vaccination is seen as a key part of the Government's strategy to bring COVID-19 under control. This guidance note does not address the very important – and difficult – issue of prioritisation of vaccines. Rather, it addresses the question of how decisions should be made about the administration of vaccines in individual cases.
4. At present, it is not clear whether any of the vaccines which may be administered will serve to lower the risk of onward transmission, as opposed to either preventing the person catching (or minimising the impact of) COVID-19. This will make a difference in terms of the application of the decision-making framework set out below, even if the framework will remain the same.

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Disclaimer: This document is based upon the law as it stands as at December 2020; it is intended as a guide to good practice, and is not a substitute for legal advice upon the facts of any specific case. No liability is accepted for any adverse consequences of reliance upon it.

The picture at the top, "Colourful," is by Geoffrey Files, a young man with autism. We are very grateful to him and his family for permission to use his artwork.

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5. In many cases, the person in question will actively want vaccination, and have capacity to consent to it. In supporting a person to make the decision whether or not to have the vaccination, it may help to have reference to our [capacity assessment guide](#). As that guide makes clear, it is important to identify the information that it is relevant to the decision in question; it is clear – we suggest – that that information will include at a minimum the following:
- the vaccination will help to protect them from COVID-19 (if there is vaccination-specific information about whether this is protection from catching it, or stopping its effect being so serious, this is likely to be relevant);
 - they cannot catch COVID-19 from the vaccination itself;
 - it will involve at least one if not two injections (depending on the vaccine); and
 - in the event that there are any side-effects of the vaccine, as listed by the manufacturer, that these side effects are a possibility.
6. However, what happens if the person (1) does not have capacity to decide to be vaccinated; or (2) has capacity to decide to be vaccinated but refuses to be? We address each in turn.

C: Lack of capacity to decide

7. If the person lacks capacity to decide whether to have the vaccination, then, unless there is a health and welfare attorney or deputy who can consent on their behalf,³ or unless the person has made an advance decision to refuse vaccination,⁴ the relevant professionals will have to decide whether they reasonably believe that vaccination is in the person's best interests. A very important point in practical terms here is **who** the relevant professionals will be. We discuss the concept of who the decision-maker is for purposes of the MCA 2005 in our [best interests guide](#); precisely who should be treated as the decision-maker in this context will depend upon how the vaccination is being delivered. However, the critical points are:

³ If the attorney or deputy refuses, then there will be a serious question mark as to whether they are acting – as they are required to – in the best interests of the person; at that point, unless they change their stance, an application to the Court of Protection will be required. As noted in the next footnote, we do not think that vaccination constitutes life-sustaining treatment such that, in principle, a deputy could refuse it, as could any health and welfare attorney. If it does constitute life-sustaining treatment, then a deputy could not refuse it, and an attorney could only refuse it if specifically empowered to do so.

⁴ Our view is that it is unlikely that an advance decision to refuse vaccination would constitute an advance decision to refuse life-sustaining treatment, so as to give rise to the additional requirements for validity contained in s.25 MCA 2005 (i.e. that the advance decision must be witnessed, be in writing, and to state that it is to apply even if life is at risk). This, however, may have to be tested in court. If a person has made an advance decision to refuse vaccination, and if it applies to the vaccination in question (which, by definition, is unlikely unless the decision was made since the start of the pandemic, unless it was a blanket refusal of **any** vaccination), then they would be in the same position, legally, as a capacitous individual refusing to consent.

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- a. That whoever is actually administering the vaccine is in a position properly to say that they reasonably believe that the person lacks capacity to consent, and that they are acting in the person's best interests;
 - b. That this belief may arise because they, the person administering the vaccine, have assessed the person's capacity and made their own decision as to whether vaccination is in their best interests. In many cases, though, and especially those of any complexity, the person actually administering the vaccine will be acting on the basis of a plan which has been drawn up and agreed by everyone interested in the person's welfare;
 - c. Well before the actual date for the potential administration of the vaccine, therefore, it will be necessary for those involved to start collating the information required to enable a best interests determination to be made, which will mean consulting with family members (and, where relevant, friends) as those best able to give input as to the person's wishes, feelings, beliefs and values.
8. There cannot be a blanket decision that vaccination is in the best interests of a group of residents or patients, as this would be contrary to the requirement of the MCA 2005 that it is the best interests of that particular person at that particular time which are determinative.⁵ However, with one exception and bearing in mind that it all does depend on the circumstances, it is likely that vaccination would be in the person's best interests for the following reasons:
- a. In many cases, it may be possible to identify that the person, were they able to, would consent to the vaccination if they had capacity, in which case the decision is an easy one, as there would be an alignment between 'what P would have done' and the outcome that would be in their best interests;⁶
 - b. Even if it is clear that the person would **not** wish to receive the vaccine, the best interests test is – ultimately – not a pure 'substituted judgment' test, and it is legitimate to take into account other factors in deciding whether to override the person's known wishes, above all the risks to them if they catch COVID-19.⁷

⁵ See *Aintree v James* [2013] UKSC 67 at paragraph 39 (all case references here are hyperlinked to case-law summaries). Blanket decision-making in the context of COVID has been identified in the DHSC guidance about [testing](#) as being problematic; it is also of course problematic as a general principle of public law.

⁶ See *Briggs v Briggs (No. 2)* [2016] EWCOP 63.

⁷ The Court of Appeal has held in the context of the MMR vaccine for children (*Re H (A Child) (Parental Responsibility: Vaccination)* [2020] EWCA Civ 664) that, "[a]lthough vaccinations are not compulsory, the scientific evidence now clearly establishes that it is in the best medical interests of children to be vaccinated in accordance with Public Health England's guidance unless there is a specific contra-indication in an individual case." The Court of Protection will no doubt have to consider whether this approach will be followed in relation to adults, but this may give an indication of its approach.

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9. Given that, at the moment, it is not clear⁸ that any of the potential vaccines will serve to reduce the risk of onward transmission, it is not clear the public health matters that we discuss in relation to testing will be relevant – i.e. that having the vaccine means that the person may pose less of a risk to others.
10. If and when public health considerations do become relevant, then we note that the best interests checklist provides for the taking into account of ‘other factors that he would be likely to consider if he were able to do so’ which might, depending on the person, include the effect the decision will have on those around them.⁹ That would mean that, in asking whether the person would have consented, it would be relevant to consider whether they would see themselves as a ‘responsible citizen’¹⁰ more broadly.
11. We should also emphasise that, despite media reports, at present **not** being vaccinated does not have consequences for the person in terms (for instance) of access to buildings or services. This, therefore, should not play into the consideration at present, but if the position does change then this will be another factor potentially speaking in favour of vaccination being in the person’s best interests.
12. Although vaccination involves at least one injection, in most cases it will be possible to carry it out in such a way that it cannot sensibly be said that any restraint of the individual will be required. If restraint – which would not necessarily need to involve physical force – is required, then consideration will have to be given as to whether the conditions in s.6 MCA 2005 are met. We note that the conditions include a specific focus upon whether the act in question is necessary to prevent harm to the person¹¹ (as opposed to others). At present, where vaccination appears primarily to be for the benefit of the person, it seems relatively clear that in most cases the first hurdle – necessity – would be satisfied. It would still, though, be important to consider whether restraint would be proportionate.
13. The one caveat to the position that vaccination is likely to be in the person’s best interests is where there is proper reason to consider that the process of carrying out the injection, itself, would cause the person serious distress or other harm – for instance if they cannot tolerate a needle. In such a case, and if there is no other way of securing administering the vaccine in an acceptable fashion, we **strongly** advise seeking legal advice as to whether an approach to the Court of Protection is

⁸ See, for instance, [this discussion](#).

⁹ Best interests might include “*altruistic sentiments and concern for others*”: see Report on Mental Incapacity (1995) Law Com No 231 at para 3.31; see also *Aintree v James* [2013] UKSC 67 at [24].

¹⁰ See, for the idea of being a responsible citizen, *SSHD v Sergei Skripal*; *SSHD v Yulia Skripal* [2018] EWCOP 8 and the MCA Code of Practice at paragraphs 5.47-48.

¹¹ Section 6(2).

required.¹² An approach may also be required where it is not properly possible to say that there is a consensus as to whether the vaccination is in the person's best interests.

14. We have been asked whether vaccination for COVID-19 constitutes serious medical treatment for purposes of s.37 MCA 2005, which would mean that it would be necessary for any NHS body carrying out the vaccination¹³ to instruct an IMCA if the person is 'unbefriended.' Whilst vaccination undoubtedly constitutes medical treatment, it is not immediately obvious that it would fall within the definition of **serious** medical treatment for the purposes of the MCA and the associated regulations. However, if there is a specific reason to consider that the very process of carrying out the vaccination (for instance to overcome any resistance on the part of the person) would be likely to "involve serious consequences for the patient" or "there is a fine balance between its benefits to the patient and the burdens and risks it is likely to entail", then it may be that an IMCA should be instructed. In any event, however, and as set out above, this is a situation in which it is suggested that an approach to the Court of Protection is likely.
15. We should note that everything that we have said above could apply in any setting – including the inpatient psychiatric setting where the person is detained under the MHA 1983.

D: Capacitous refusal

16. By comparison with the equivalent section in the guidance note on testing, this section can be short. We cannot see that there is a power to compel a person to undergo vaccination if they have capacity to decide whether or not to have the vaccine and refuse.¹⁴ We say this also in relation to patients detained under the MHA 1983, because we cannot see how it could sensibly be said that vaccination for COVID-19 represents treatment for mental disorder. If it is not treatment for mental disorder, the relevant professionals cannot avail themselves of the provisions of Part 4 of that Act so as to treat against the patient's will.

E: Useful resources

17. Useful free websites include:
- www.39essex.com/resources-and-training/mental-capacity-law – database of guidance notes (including as to capacity assessment) case summaries and case comments from the monthly 39 Essex Chambers Mental Capacity Law Report, to which a free subscription can be obtained by emailing marketing@39essex.com.

¹² See the Serious Medical Treatment Guidance issued by the Vice-President in January 2020 ([2020] EWCOP 2).

¹³ It is not clear whether every vaccination will be carried out by an NHS body. There is a gap in the law in relation to a situation where the vaccination is to be carried out by someone else as the duty to instruct an IMCA would not arise.

¹⁴ Or have made a valid and applicable advance decision to refuse it, or if a deputy or attorney with the appropriate power is (properly directing themselves as to their best interests) refusing.

- www.mclap.org.uk – website set up by Alex with forums, papers and other resources with a view to enabling professionals of all hues to ‘do’ the MCA 2005 better. It has a specific [page](#) of resources relating to COVID-19 and the MCA 2005.
- www.mentalhealthlawonline.co.uk – extensive site containing legislation, case transcripts and other useful material relating to both the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and Mental Health Act 1983. It has transcripts for more Court of Protection cases than any other site (including subscription-only sites), as well as an extremely useful discussion list.
- www.scie.org.uk/mca-directory/ - the Social Care Institute of Excellence database of materials relating to the MCA.

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