

21.06.08

3 Senator S.C. Ferguson of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the offer of Covid-19 vaccinations to staff at Mont-à-l'Abbé School. (OQ.116/2021):

Will the Minister explain whether any consideration was given to offering the staff at Mont à l'Abbé School early COVID-19 vaccinations at the same time as carers in residential homes and, if not, why?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

The request to vaccinate the staff at Mont à l'Abbé School as an occupational group was reconsidered by the Independent Vaccination Panel on 19th May this year. The panel, having reviewed the submission made by Senator Ferguson, concluded that there was no evidence that the occupational group set out at the time of the submission had higher rates of mortality than the age-based priority groups, had a higher risk of acquiring infection or risk of developing serious disease.

3.3.1 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

From my understanding of the work that is done at Mont à l'Abbé School, I understand the teachers are more akin to care workers than straightforward teachers. To be treated like this I think is not good enough. Will the Minister look into this properly and just come back to the House, this Assembly, with a proper evaluation of the setup?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

All the circumstances surrounding this occupational group and their needs were fully evaluated and considered by the Independent Vaccination Panel which is comprised by the acting medical officer, the chief pharmacist, the chair of Primary Care, the associate medical director and the chief executive officer for the Citizens Advice Bureau, people with sufficient expertise to be able to make a proper assessment of the needs of that group. As I said, it was not considered that their needs trumped the priorities set out for the vaccination programme which have been identified by the U.K.'s (United Kingdom) Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and whose advice we are largely following.

3.3.2 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier:

Does the Minister know whether anybody who made the decision visited Mont à l'Abbé, had any sort of interaction with the staff or the head teacher of Mont à l'Abbé in order to increase their understanding of the day-to-day work and the proximity that staff have with pupils at that school consistently?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not know that but neither do I not know whether that invitation was extended to any of the members of the panel.

3.3.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Would the Minister not agree that an invitation not extended should have been acted on by the council undertaking this decision-making process or indeed the Minister himself visiting Mont à l'Abbé in order to understand the specificity of their work would have been a really sensible way to move forward on this issue?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I believe that the calibre of persons we have on the panel and the advice that we are following in close alignment with the J.C.V.I. (Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation) that all pertinent facts were before the panel, or could have been put before the panel by those making the submission on behalf of this occupational group, and I have no reason to believe that the panel erred.

3.3.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Given the fact that the pupils at Mont à l'Abbé are not normal school pupils and there will be many occasions where it is not possible to have social distancing or wearing masks or anything like that, surely to goodness the Minister is in charge, he can, as Deputy Ward said, have got a proper first-hand comment on this rather than ...

The Bailiff:

Senator, you must focus this into a question, I am afraid.

Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Yes, I am coming to the question.

The Bailiff:

Well, it is sounding like a speech at the moment, Senator.

Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Surely he could have had a proper review of the situation with a visit from the panel rather than just a review from a distance and everything done almost as a paper exercise.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I think we have to realise that vaccine supply was not immediate, it has been a rollout of a vaccine over a number of months and therefore it has been necessary around the world, not just in Jersey, to prioritise who should receive vaccines first. This is not the only group that requested that they be made a priority. There are other groups and persons who have requested that they be prioritised and I believe that it takes necessary expertise to assess that priority, an expertise that I or perhaps other politicians would not hold. Therefore, it is right that we entrust that decision to those who hold the required degree of knowledge and experience in assessing the impacts of COVID, whether that group is vulnerable to mortality or serious illness and, if they find not, then that group should quite properly be understood. But the decision made that they should not achieve a priority over others who are in greater need and greater risk of mortality or serious harm, that is their assessment and I believe they got it right.