

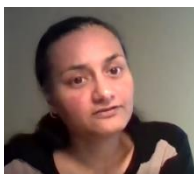
# Summary of Covid vaccine information session held with Reading Kenyan Association

*About the event: Healthwatch Reading was pleased to work with the Reading Kenyan Association to facilitate a Zoom meeting between association leaders and local experts.*

*Everyone involved gave up 90 minutes of their time on the Sunday afternoon of Mother's Day, 14 March 2021, demonstrating a commitment to sharing and understanding information about Covid vaccines, answering questions from the community and discussing challenges.*

*The event was the third co-hosted by Healthwatch Reading to help local people make informed choices for themselves.*

## Event facilitators



**Mandeep Kaur Bains, chief executive of Healthwatch Reading**  
Mandeep heads Reading's statutory patient and public involvement body and also sits on a local Covid inequalities group, and the council's Covid Outbreak Engagement Board.

## **Bernice Boore, Reading Kenyan Association**

Bernice is also a lead nurse at the Royal Berkshire Hospital and recently won a Royal College of Nursing award for 'Making A Difference'. She has been active in spreading the message about the importance of local people getting the Covid vaccine.



## Main speakers

- **Jessica Acquah, biomedical scientist**  
Until last October, Jessica worked in the NHS at London's Charing Cross Hospital and now works in the private sector. She is a member of the Royal Society of Public Health and a public health advisor.
- **Meradin Peachey, director of public health for Berkshire West**  
Meradin is part of Public Health for Berkshire, the body responsible for public health protection and promotion across six local authorities, including Reading. She has held many public health roles and has also been a nurse and midwife.

## Participants

The event was attended mainly by leaders within the Kenyan Reading Association. Other participants included Nisa Unis, Reading Borough Council's Covid-19 communication, engagement and outreach officer and Cecily Mwanki, community engagement lead at Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

## Summary of discussions

Meradin Peachey introduced her role, giving the key points:

- She works for local councils and also liaises closely with the NHS
- She wants Berkshire people to get the right vaccines, from the right locations
- She speaks to England’s chief medical officer weekly (along with 150 other public health directors) to ask questions and give feedback
- She has read relevant vaccines research and is keen to answer questions from people who don’t feel confident about getting immunised
- There are facts about vaccines, information on testing and videos, on the webpage: <https://www.berkshirepublichealth.co.uk/information-centre/>

Jessica Acquah introduced her role, giving the key points:

- Her previous role was at a London training hospital during the first lockdown
- She aims to educate, equip and empower ethnic minority groups
- She was born, and grew up, in Ghana and can relate to people’s hesitancy
- She talks passionately about vaccines as a long-proven public health measure.

## A brief history of vaccination

Jessica gave a brief history about vaccination, with the key points:

- The world’s first vaccine, for smallpox, was developed by English doctor Edward Jenner in 1796. He used the content of blisters from a woman (who had become infected with the virus from contact with a cow), to inoculate a healthy young boy, who became slightly unwell but then recovered.
- Vaccines have since been developed to protect populations from serious diseases like Ebola, yellow fever and typhoid.

## How vaccines work and their importance for ethnic minority people

Jessica explained:

- Vaccines prompt your body to make antibodies and T-cells to fight future infections of the disease and to remember the disease for the future.
- Vaccines are important for people from ethnic minorities, many of whom who have sickle cell disease or have sickle cell trait - which affect your blood supply and your body’s strength to fight infections.
- You can’t build your own Covid immunity through actions such as inhalations, as your blood will not be exposed to the disease to trigger your body to fight it.
- “Vaccines are made to trigger a memory in our bloodstream, so that in future if I get Covid - maybe not this time when I’m strong but maybe 10-20 years down the line - it won’t take my life because the memory is in my blood, it stays there.”

## Why have Covid vaccines been developed so quickly?

Jessica:

- Charitable donations worth millions from various wealthy individuals and companies have helped fund global research and trials. Usually, scientists have to go through a lengthy process of bidding for the funds needed.

Meradin:

- For the first time there was collaboration across all vaccine companies rather than competition, in order to find an urgent solution for dealing with the pandemic.

## Why doesn't Covid appear to affect black people as badly in Africa as it does here in the UK?

Jessica:

- Research has shown that vitamin D is important for antibody activation, but we don't get enough in the UK (which is why doctors recommend we take vitamin D tablets). In Africa, people get it directly from the sun, which 'wakes' up an inactive form of vitamin D under your skin. That could be one reason people have been more protected in Africa, but even now cases there are rising.

Meradin:

- Some parts of Africa (and India) don't experience global travel like the UK does with people coming and going on planes and trains and spreading the virus.
- The UK is very good at collecting data about how diseases affect its population, and other countries may not collect data in the same way so direct comparisons about who is affected most, may not be accurate.

## Why does Covid affect ethnic minority people more in the UK?

Meradin:

- UK research shows you are more likely to die from Covid-19 if you live in an economically deprived area; you have a long-term condition such as high blood pressure or diabetes; you are obese or you are a front-line worker such as a nurse or transport worker. Ethnic minority people may be more likely to live in socio-economically deprived areas, or more likely to be in front-facing jobs. We also know that people from India and Pakistan have much higher rates of diabetes.
- “I think this country does need to address some of these inequalities...and how we can redress the balance. Are we preventing enough people getting diabetes or high blood pressure? Are we doing enough blood pressure checks through general practice? Those kinds of things.”

## How often will we need to get a Covid vaccination?

Jessica:

- Research is still going on but immunity is believed to last for a minimum of six months.
- Even if you have had Covid, you still need the vaccine to build up your immunity even further, to create a lot of memories in your blood to fight it in the future.

## How safe is the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine - some European countries are banning it because of possible links to blood clots?

Meradin:

- Europe first said it wasn't safe for the over-65s group because the vaccine trials didn't include many older people, but in the UK, we have been able to show this age group does get good immunity from this vaccine, and then Europe changed its advice for this age group.
- There will always be a certain percentage of the population that will get blood clots - we need to check, is the number reported after vaccines the same as these rates anyway or are they going up?
- There is very good information sharing going on about the safety of vaccines.

[After this Zoom session, in early April 2021, the UK's drugs' safety body, the MHRA changed its advice, based on new data, to say 18-29-year-olds should be offered a different vaccine from the Oxford/AstraZeneca one].

## Why do some people get Covid after they have had a vaccine?

Bernice Boore:

- Those people probably contracted Covid-19 just before walking into the vaccine centre.
- You need to be four weeks clear from the day you had your first positive swab before you can have a vaccine.

## Will Covid vaccines be made compulsory?

Meradin:

- She is not aware of any plans to make them compulsory.
- The UK doesn't have compulsory vaccinations like other countries do, such as for childhood vaccinations, in Japan, Australia or New Zealand.
- Some countries require you to have vaccinations for other diseases before travelling to them, so it is possible that other countries may decide to do that for Covid-19 vaccination.

## What are the challenges of testing, tracing and self-isolation?

Bernice:

- We have to acknowledge that some people will feel pressure to go to work as the main breadwinners, supporting extended families. Some people are in the UK on work permits that don’t allow them any recourse to public funds, so they wouldn’t automatically qualify for the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment.

Meradin:

- Locally, certain transport workers had not wanted to come forward for testing because they felt they couldn’t afford not to work.
- In theory, you need your own room, own bathroom and not to touch anything else anyone else touches for two weeks, which would be difficult if there were lots of people in your home.
- “What some other countries have done is to pay people to go and stay in a hotel away from your family for two weeks. I think there’s a lot we can learn from Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong on this.”

## How can community leaders tackle misinformation or ‘Covid-deniers’?

Jessica:

- Share your experiences and be honest. “When I had my vaccine, I told people that when I got home, I was tired, because of this new thing coming into my bloodstream and it took a day or two for me to get up and go to work. Then people can relate to you [if the same thing happens to them] and think ‘okay, it’s normal’.”

Meradin:

- Help people gain an understanding of why we call it a pandemic and why we take it seriously. Describe its origins in China, how it spread, and how tracking the data showed this new virus was causing serious illness and excess deaths [more people dying than would generally do so before the virus] and how this excess death rate got even higher as the virus mutated.

Nisa Unis:

- There is good information on the websites of [Reading Borough Council](#), [Healthwatch Reading](#) and [Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group](#) (the body that plans and funds local NHS services). “But this is for those who actually want to know and are curious.”
- People are entitled to have their own opinion and make up their mind.

- We have to be aware that the spotlight on the impact of Covid-19 on ethnic minority people can make people “feel stigmatised, victimised or put in the corner”.
- Over time, with more people getting vaccinated, talking about it with others and the spreading of trusted information, it will start feeling more normal and people may be willing to change their minds.
- Her own role at the council was recently created to improve the way the council engaged with diverse communities, with similar events to this one being planned for the future to carry on talking, sharing information and listening to people.

Cecily:

- Communities have not always been well represented on official bodies but the fact that organisations and speakers had given their time on a Sunday afternoon showed a willingness to engage.
- Community leaders could take away credible information from sessions like these and cascade to others.

## Summing up

Participants gave positive feedback about the value of the talk and gave applause of thanks to the professionals who spoke and people who organised the event.

*If you have questions about this summary report, or you are a community group wanting support to host talks and information sessions about Covid-19 vaccines or access to any other NHS or social care service, please do not hesitate to contact Healthwatch Reading:*

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