Vaccine passports are destined for the policy

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Who remembers "immunity passports"? It might seem a lifetime ago, but last April the Government debated whether someone who had caught Covid-19 and recovered from it should be given a certificate to resume normal life.

The idea soon died. An immunity passport would have encouraged young people to deliberately seek infection, impairing public health efforts. Demand for antibody tests would have shot up as a free hit for freedom, and with actual prevalence low, led to a high proportion of "false positives" among those deemed to have antibodies. Ultimately, the tests proved an imperfect guide to immunity anyway, sometimes only showing antibodies for a few months despite infection providing longer-lasting protection.

Government-backed "vaccine passports" will, I suspect, also end up in the policy graveyard. Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove has been tasked with reviewing them under the lockdown exit roadmap. But while some private businesses may require vaccination proof for patrons or inbound travellers in the near future, a government-backed scheme is completely unnecessary. The short-term hurdles to implementing it will be huge, and by the time they are overcome, the hassle will not be worth it.

Unlike immunity passports, government vaccine passports create a positive dynamic in theory. Even talk of their possibility provides an incentive to get vaccinated, so actually enhancing public health efforts. Who wants to be locked out from their football club, travelling abroad, or even from going to their favourite boozer after a year at home? The prospect encourages the pro-social action of getting immunised.

Certainly, the British public recognise these benefits. Large majorities support a "vaccine passport" right now, not just for travel or visiting care homes, but even for hairdressers or the gym. Arguments about the creation of a "two-tier society" rightly do not wash: Covid-19 has wrought destruction by killing 127,000 people while certain occupations have had to work throughout. In the private sphere, why should people working in social industries not have the freedom to set association restrictions to protect their employees and other customers?

Right now, care homes are having to navigate housing vulnerable people, some of whom cannot be vaccinated, with returning visitors who are unwilling or yet unable to be jabbed. Even working men's clubs in some parts of the country are patronised by elderly guests, and their owners may decide they want to offer a safer environment by setting new rules on entry.

Government should not preclude against such private decisions. These locally-set policies aren't impingements on fundamental freedoms but exercises of them. Yet there's a world of difference between businesses experimenting as things reopen and a state-backed licence or mandate on industries.

The Prime Minister has said no national scheme would come into effect until everyone had been offered the chance of vaccination. Yet that is when the public health benefits of screening would be weakest. Every indication suggests that <u>over three-quarters of the public overall will get jabbed</u>. This will severely cut the overall transmission of the disease, as well as near-eliminating the worst risks of death or hospitalisation.

We do not have flu passports, so why, once risks have fallen, would a domestic Covid-19 vaccine passport be needed? As the health threat of Covid-19 trails off, reopened hospitality industries will be reluctant to spend time and resources policing such a scheme and, in any case, the real public health threat would be from new vaccine-resistant variants that an existing vaccine passport would do little to mitigate.

That raises other questions: would any UK scheme only recognise the vaccines approved by our own Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, or those deemed safe abroad? If the South African variant gets a foothold in the UK, will the terms of the scheme change given certain vaccines appear much less effective against it? And how long would this "green light" associated with any vaccine last? We don't really know yet how long they confer immunity for, after all. So would these passports need to be renewed forever?

Gove has already acknowledged that a "vaccine passport" would, in reality, have to be a broader "Covid status" certification to cover all bases, with perhaps an app allowing you to include recent negative test results or any immunity from infection. But that itself raises all sorts of uncomfortable issues. Not everyone has a smartphone, for one. By the time a paper-based alternative was set up robust to potential fraud, any health benefit would again be miniscule.

The strongest case for some vaccination proof is for international travel. Yet even here it's not clear why the Government must reinvent the wheel with its own programme. The International Air Transport Association is already working on a "travel pass" to provide airlines, passengers, and governments with the assurance that the tests and vaccinations of passengers are accurate and from reputable sources. At most the Government could "certify" such efforts for inbound travellers.

The idea though that we'll all be flashing a QR health code to enter the cinema or to go to McDonald's once everyone has had vaccine opportunities is just fanciful. And governments should be wary of contemplating a policy that has no logical end point and which would impose costs without, at that stage, any obviously large benefit.

Some firms will no doubt set their own association requirements in the coming months, just as individuals will be more willing to meet with vaccinated friends. The Government too might keep up the chatter about domestic vaccine passports to further boost vaccine take up. But when you think through all these difficulties, the best bet is that any government-led domestic vaccine passport will be quietly shelved, just as immunity passports beforehand.