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# Antivaxers are a global menace who must be defeated

Ara Darzi | Monday October 03 2022, 12.00am BST, The Times

**T**he latest stage in the battle against Covid-19 has begun. Across the UK people aged over 50 are being called for vaccination with a booster this autumn to protect them against a likely new wave of infection this winter. But how many will accept it?

The anti-vaccine movement is a growing threat to public health here and across the globe. Over 3.7 million people in Britain (6.4 per cent) are yet to have a single dose of the Covid vaccine, with rates of refusal highest among young adults, the black population, the unemployed and the deprived. In the United States 21 per cent are not vaccinated at all.

The risk of death is 14 times higher in the unvaccinated and without full coverage the danger to the wider population is increased. Thousands of deaths have been linked to vaccine refusal. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that 37,961 unvaccinated people in the UK died with Covid-19 mentioned on their death certificates between January 2021 and March 2022. In the vast majority of cases where Covid is mentioned, it is the underlying cause of death.

In the US the Kaiser Family Foundation estimated that 234,000 Covid-19 deaths in the nine months to March 2022 could have been prevented by vaccination. That toll is nearly double all American deaths in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq together.

The modern anti-vaccine movement started in Britain with the

publication of a now infamous paper in The Lancet in 1998 falsely linking autism with measles vaccination. It accelerated in the US in the 2010s and was amplified by Donald Trump who played down the risks of the pandemic in its early stages.

The campaign in the US expanded into Europe in the summer of 2020 with anti-vaccine, anti-mask and anti-lockdown rallies in London, Berlin and Paris. Vaccine refusal is now a growing problem in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The US surgeon-general demanded “co-ordinated, at scale investment to tackle misinformation” during the Covid pandemic, a call to be echoed at the World Innovation Summit for Health in Qatar this week with a report that will urge the UN to create a task force to respond to the growing threat.

The anti-vaccine, anti-science movement has become a global menace. It has exposed the loss of trust in government, the weakness of global health communication strategies and the pernicious impact of organised disinformation. Science cannot beat disease alone — credible, trusted information clearly communicated is vital too.

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