

Nurses attack minister's 'bullying' on vaccines

Rosie Taylor

Nurses have criticised the health secretary for his "inflammatory" suggestion that unvaccinated children could be banned from schools.

Matt Hancock said that the so-called anti-vaxx movement had "blood on their hands" and would not rule out mandatory vaccinations or stopping unvaccinated children from attending schools.

The annual congress of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) in Liverpool heard from nurses yesterday who criticised the minister for his "bullying" language and said that parents should not

be "forced" to vaccinate their children. They said that parents should instead be taught about the benefits of vaccination so that they could make an educated choice, and they condemned social media companies for failing to stop the spread of "fake news" about vaccines.

While Mr Hancock and Simon Stevens, head of NHS England, have sounded the alarm about anti-vaccine sentiment on social media, a divide has opened up with Public Health England, which plays down the risk and says vaccine coverage is slipping because it is becoming harder to see a GP or nurse.

Dame Donna Kinnair, chief executive of the RCN, said that she was

pleased Mr Hancock wanted to encourage the take-up of vaccinations but warned that his use of "inflammatory language" could isolate families.

She said: "Sweeping statements are fine if you're trying to get headlines but as nurses we work with families so we understand the issues." She said that after spending time with parents, most chose vaccination.

Claire Picton, a nurse, told delegates: "We need to listen to the language that we are using. I took complete exception to Matt Hancock talking about 'anti-vaxxers'. What sort of message is that sending to people?"

"We are trying to educate people to

vaccinate their children, not to make them feel like they are being bullied into something they, for whatever reason, feel is not right."

Louise Cahill, from Bristol, said that social media companies needed to take more responsibility for the spread of anti-vaccine misinformation.

"As nurses, let's understand the fears that lead people to choose not to vaccinate, and educate," she said. "Let's hold social media companies to account for not tackling the spread of fake news."

The health secretary was backed by Nykoma Hamilton, an infection-control nurse and mother-of-three from Fife, Scotland, who introduced the

debate. "If your child had a severe nut allergy, the school would ask people not to bring any peanuts in," she said. "So why are we allowing children to bring preventable communicable disease into schools?"

The Department of Health said: "The UK has a world-leading vaccination programme and uptake remains very high at around 90 per cent for most childhood vaccines, including MMR. We will continue to increase confidence in vaccination by working with social media companies to stop the spread of false information — and are reviewing how to improve vaccine uptake."