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Trampling on the public's trust

When thousands of confused and anxious parents have already been put through the emotional wringer in the controversy over MMR, didn't it occur to anyone in Whitehall that the whole issue of child vaccination needed to be addressed with sensitivity and skill?

Evidently not. In the quite separate row over the five-in-one jab for babies, the Government's clumsy, half-leaked, half-announced plans might almost have been designed to provoke unease.

Yes, it is welcome that the use of mercury in vaccines is being scrapped. Concerns that it might cause autism surfaced five years ago, and it has been phased out in America, Japan and much of Europe. But Britain has so far dragged its feet, perhaps because mercury-free vaccines are more expensive. Even now, astonishingly, the new jab won't be generally available for at least six weeks.

So what are parents supposed to do? Allow their babies to be injected with the present vaccine which might - just might - carry some risk, however remote? Or refuse until the new version is available?

That isn't the end of it. Under the new system, five vaccines will be administered at the same time, instead of four. But there are already suggestions that such multiple 'cocktails' can create problems.

Most scientists, it has to be said, don't share those doubts. They insist the new vaccine is safe. In ordinary circumstances, such assurances would be enough.

Sadly, the public is no longer inclined to take anything on trust. Consider what happened over MMR. Dr Andrew Wakefield, the researcher who raised doubts about the triple jab, was ruthlessly hounded out of his job. Meanwhile, a bullying Government flatly refuses to allow worried parents the choice of single injections. And while Ministers move heaven and earth to impose MMR, the Blairs won't say if it has been given to their son Leo.

But then, the vaccination issue always seems to reveal this administration at its worst. After all, didn't this Prime Minister allow Labour donor Paul Drayson to make £20 million out of a Government contract for smallpox vaccine (while competitors hardly got a look-in) and hand him a peerage into the bargain?

Now we are seeing the results of the years of cronyism, sleaze and mendacious spin. This latest imbroglio isn't simply about the ways babies are inoculated.

Wouldn't it be more accurate to describe it as another symptom of the way New Labour has undermined faith in the integrity of public life?

Core values

One thing can be almost guaranteed about Michael Howard's speech this week stressing discipline, responsibility, respect and the importance of a father's influence in bringing up boys. Our right-on, politically correct, liberal establishment will greet it with disdain.

But it will strike a chord with the millions whose lives are blighted by jobbery, drunkenness and the steady coarsening of a society mired in the culture of compensation and 'rights'.

Their misery won't be assuaged by the seemingly endless crackdowns on anti-social behaviour, especially when our feeble courts are so reluctant to enforce the law properly.

No, there has to be a fundamental change in attitudes. Mr Howard is undoubtedly right to argue that such change must begin within the family and at school. For years, it has been fashionably - and patronisingly - assumed that the 'causes of crime' are poverty and inequality. But since Britain today is wealthier and more egalitarian than ever, isn't it more likely that the roots of the problem lie in the collapse of values once taken for granted?

Mr Howard's speech should ignite a debate that has been stifled for too long.

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