Medicines & Healthcare products
Regulatory Agency

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Canary Wharf
London
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United Kingdom
gov.uk/mhra

[redacted]

8 November 2023

Dear [redacted]

FOI 23/761

Thank you for your request for information dated 11 October 2023, where you asked:

> "[…] In view of the 2020 legal case in which it was recognised that ethical veganism is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, are any steps being taken to ensure that vaccines (including a vaccine for Covid 19) are being provided by the NHS that are suitable for ethical vegans in terms of both ingredients and testing?
>
> If there are no steps being taken to make vaccines suitable for ethical vegans, please identify under what clause of the Equality Act 2010 this discrimination would be permitted."[…]"

Our response

In terms of the Equality Act, and cases of discrimination, our understanding is the central factor depends on whether or not one group is treated unfairly, for example, on the basis of their sex, or religion, philosophy or other protected characteristic. In terms of vaccines and the inclusion of materials from animal origin, in our opinion, this relates to practical considerations and in relation to needs in biotech. manufacturing—rather than a deliberate attempt to prejudice against or treat ethical vegans in an unfair manner.

The use of animals in research
The three Rs (replacement, reduction, refinement) are enshrined in UK law:

> "[…](2)For the purposes of this Act—
> (a)the principle of replacement is the principle that, wherever possible, a scientifically satisfactory method or testing strategy not entailing the use of protected animals must be used instead of a regulated procedure;
> (b)the principle of reduction is the principle that whenever a programme of work involving the use of protected animals is carried out the number of protected animals used must be reduced to a minimum without compromising the objectives of the programme;
> (c)the principle of refinement is the principle that the breeding, accommodation and care of protected animals and the methods used in regulated procedures applied to such animals must be refined so as to eliminate or reduce to the minimum any possible pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm to those animals."
>
> * Subject to the provisions of this section, "a protected animal" for the purposes of this Act means any living vertebrate other than man

The 3R principles apply to medicines including the testing of vaccines.

Ingredients in vaccines
To promote informed consent, in terms of vaccine ingredients, where applicable, public assessment reports (UKPAR; produced by MHRA or in relation to a Reliance procedure an EPAR produced by the European Medicines Agency) will include the following statement 'No excipients of animal or human origin are used in the finished product', where this statement does not apply a suitable alternative will be in its place e.g. 'With the exception of […] ingredient/s, no excipients of animal or human origin are used in the final products'. Please note, these statements do not cater to animal origin material in trace amounts (residues).

Please refer to the following further information in relation to human and animal products in vaccines (where COVID-19 vaccines are mentioned): Guide to the use of human and animal products in vaccines - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The above reflects the information we are aware of which relates to your question. We hope that you have found this information helpful. However, if you disagree with how we have interpreted the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in answering your request, you can ask us to review our actions and decisions by writing to: info@mhra.gov.uk, and requesting an internal review.

Please note that your internal review request must be in a recordable format (email, letter, audio tape etc.), and that you have 40 working days upon receipt of this response to ask for a review. We aim to provide a full response to your review request within 20 working days of its receipt. Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you would have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Please bear in mind that the Information Commissioner will not normally review our handling of your request unless you have first contacted us to conduct an internal review. The Information Commissioner can be contacted online via an electronic form: https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/foi-and-eir-complaints/foi-and-eir-complaints/

Or in writing to:
Information Commissioner's Office,
Wycliffe House,
Water Lane,
Wilmslow,
Cheshire,
SK9 5AF

Yours sincerely,

HQA FOI Team