

Home Office urged to reconsider unethical age assessments for children seeking asylum



The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH), the British Dental Association (BDA) and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) have jointly written to Home Secretary, James Cleverly to express concerns with plans laid out by the Government to use 'scientific methods' to determine a young person's age. These 'scientific methods' include the use of x-ray and MRI scanning of teeth and bones. The government has not yet laid out how these tests will interact with the currently used Merton-compliant social work assessments. The organisations are deeply disturbed by these plans due to their unethical and inaccurate nature.

The RCPCH, BDA and BASW have persistently spoken out against the use of x-rays and other biological methods of age assessment for this group of young people. It is RCPCH's position that exposure to radiation through x-ray imaging for a non-medical purpose is not ethical, and that there is insufficient evidence to make accurate conclusions about the age of this population of children from the methods currently available and proposed by the Government. The Government's own Scientific Advisory Committee has advised against these proposals.

There are additionally concerns about stipulations made in the Illegal Migration Act 2023 which suggest that refusal to undertake a biological age assessment will

be held *against* vulnerable children as a part of the decision-making process with regards to their asylum claim. It is the organisations' view that the consequences of this refusal undermine the principles of informed consent, which should apply to any medical procedure or test, as the potential consequences of deportation result in duress to consent. RCPCH is clear that this is both a children's rights and medical ethics issue.

Furthermore, there is considerable confusion over who will conduct the medical investigations, how requests are going to be raised, and who will bear the cost. There are also wider issues to take into account, such as the impact these unethical assessments could have on the NHS at a time when we are already seeing major delays in offering x-ray and MRI appointments for patients. The Secondary Legislation Committee in the House of Lords has itself called out the poor process that has been followed in developing this hugely consequential legislation.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'Dentists are health professionals, not border guards, and we want no part in age checks that fail basic tests on ethics and accuracy.'

'These x-rays can never deliver the precision required to draw a line between vulnerable young people and adults.'

'The Home Office have been reaching for silver bullets and come back with pseudo-science.'

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