

Parents furious as 13-year-old girls given contraceptive implants at school without their knowledge

- Devices temporarily prevent pregnancy by releasing hormones into the blood
- **In 2011, 1,700 girls aged 13/14 were fitted with implants**
- Under 'patient confidentiality' rules, school staff are banned from seeking permission of parents beforehand

Girls as young as 13 are being given contraceptive implants at school without their parents' knowledge. Nurses insert devices into their arms which temporarily prevent pregnancy by releasing hormones into the blood.

Last year 1,700 girls aged 13 and 14 were fitted with implants, while 800 had injections which have the same effect.

The 2010/11 NHS figures also show that 3,200 15-year-old girls were fitted with implants, and 1,700 had injections.



The contraceptive implant Nexplanon is 4cm long and is inserted under the skin. A parent was outraged after it was implanted in her 13-year-old's arm

But under strict 'patient confidentiality' rules, staff are banned from seeking the permission of parents beforehand – or even informing them afterwards.

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Not all the girls would have had the procedures at school. Some may have been treated at family planning clinics or a GP surgery.

But MPs and campaigners say the scheme is morally wrong and violates parents' right to protect their children.

HOW DOES THE CONTRACEPTIVE IMPLANT WORK?

The only contraceptive implant in use in the UK is Nexplanon.

It consists of a 4cm thin flexible tube that is inserted under the skin of the upper arm by a specially trained nurse or doctor.

It releases the hormone progesterone to stop the release of an egg from the ovary, thereby preventing pregnancy.

The implant works for three years before it needs to be replaced and is 99% effective.

It doesn't rely on remembering to take a pill at the same time each day.

However, it can disrupt periods during the first year or even stop them completely while it is implanted.

Some women have complained of headaches, acne, nausea and breast tenderness in the first few months of use.

Some research has suggested it may slightly raise the risk of breast cancer. Studies are ongoing.

Both forms of contraception can bring on unpleasant side-effects including weight gain, depression, acne and irregular periods.

The jabs have also been linked to bone-thinning, although experts say fractures are unlikely if they are used only for a short time.

The implants and injections are being offered to girls in nine secondary schools and three sixth form colleges in Southampton under a scheme run by NHS Solent. The sexual health clinics also offer other forms of contraception, advice and tests for infections.

The trust introduced the scheme in 2009 to tackle high rates of teenage pregnancy, which are among the worst in the country.

It is not known how many other areas are operating similar policies, but in 2008 the Department of Health wrote to 21 authorities with high rates of teenage pregnancy, including Bristol, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Rotherham, Nottingham and Peterborough, urging them to increase the uptake of implants and jabs.

The implants last for three years before they need replacement. Injections are effective for up to three months.

One mother whose 13-year-old daughter was given an implant at a Southampton school said: 'I feel really angry. I agree that teaching teenagers about sexual health and contraception is very important but this is a step too far.'

THE RULES THAT GAG DOCTORS AND NURSES

STRICT patient confidentiality rules forbid nurses and doctors from telling parents their daughters have been given the implants. The same is true for abortions or any other form of contraception. The rules state that under-16s 'have the same right to confidentiality as adults'. The Department of Health claims that without this assurance, teenagers would be unwilling to seek help. The patient confidentiality rules are spelled out in Department of Health guidelines and they also form part of the codes of conduct for nurses, via the Nursing and Midwifery Council, and doctors, via the General Medical Council. In 1986 the rules were challenged in a high-profile case involving mother-of-ten Victoria Gillick, who tried to prevent her daughters being given the Pill without her knowledge. She initially won in the High Court, but then lost in the House of Lords which ruled that any treatment or advice must be confidential. The rules were challenged again in 2004 by mother Susan Axon who went to the High Court demanding the right for parents to know if their children were having abortions. She also lost.

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'I have spoken to a lot of parents at the school and they were horrified to find out this was happening.'

Tory MP Nadine Dorries said: 'This is a violation of parents' right to protect and nurture their children. It is a surgically invasive procedure being imposed on children without parents' knowledge.'

But Natika Halil of the Family Planning Association said: 'The provision of sexual health support to young people is a vital part of the Government's strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy rates in the UK which are amongst the highest in Europe.'



Teen mother: Solent NHS Trust said the scheme had cut under-16 pregnancies

Although teenage pregnancy rates in Britain are now beginning to fall, they are still twice as high as those in France and Germany and five times the rate in the Netherlands.

The Department of Health said: 'Young people should think carefully before having sex. If they decide the time is right, they should talk to an adult about contraception.'

'The health professional should be fully satisfied that the young person understands all the issues before they prescribe any contraceptive.'

A spokesman for NHS Solent said that since the scheme was introduced the number of teenage pregnancies had fallen.