

Metropolitan Police counter-terror chief Neil Basu calls for action on coronavirus anti-vaxxers

Britain's top counter-terrorism officer today called for a nationwide debate on the introduction of new laws to punish people who spread anti-vaccination conspiracy theories.



Met Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu said that there should be a discussion about whether it is “the correct thing for society to allow” people to spread “misinformation that could cost people’s lives” as he responded to concern that false claims online could undermine the take up of Covid-19 vaccines.

Mr Basu stopped short of endorsing the idea of a new law but his intervention will strengthen pressure on ministers to act against conspiracy theorists making false claims about the vaccines.

“There is a debate for society to have about free speech and responsibility and people who are spreading misinformation that could cost people’s lives... whether that is the correct thing for this society to allow to happen,” said Mr Basu.

Officials said that one reason for Mr Basu’s concern was that Islamist and far-Right groups were using false claims about coronavirus to radicalise followers.

Labour has also called for action, saying that emergency legislation should be introduced to allow fines and criminal penalties for social media firms that refuse to take down false material about Covid-19 vaccines.

Ministers insist they are already taking the problem seriously and point to a commitment from Facebook, Twitter and Google to label or remove content identified as misleading.

Mr Basu’s comments came as Counter Terrorism Policing launched a campaign to persuade family and friends to raise the alarm if they suspect young people are becoming radicalised.

The move is prompted by fears that some vulnerable people are having reduced contact with teachers, health staff, social workers or others who might normally spot signs of danger. Officers want loved ones to use a confidential helpline, 0800 011 3764, to report signs of radicalisation. An “ACT Early” website — actearly.uk — has also been set up.

Police disclosed today that the number of Londoners aged 19 or under who have been referred to the Prevent counter-extremism scheme has risen by a fifth in the past year