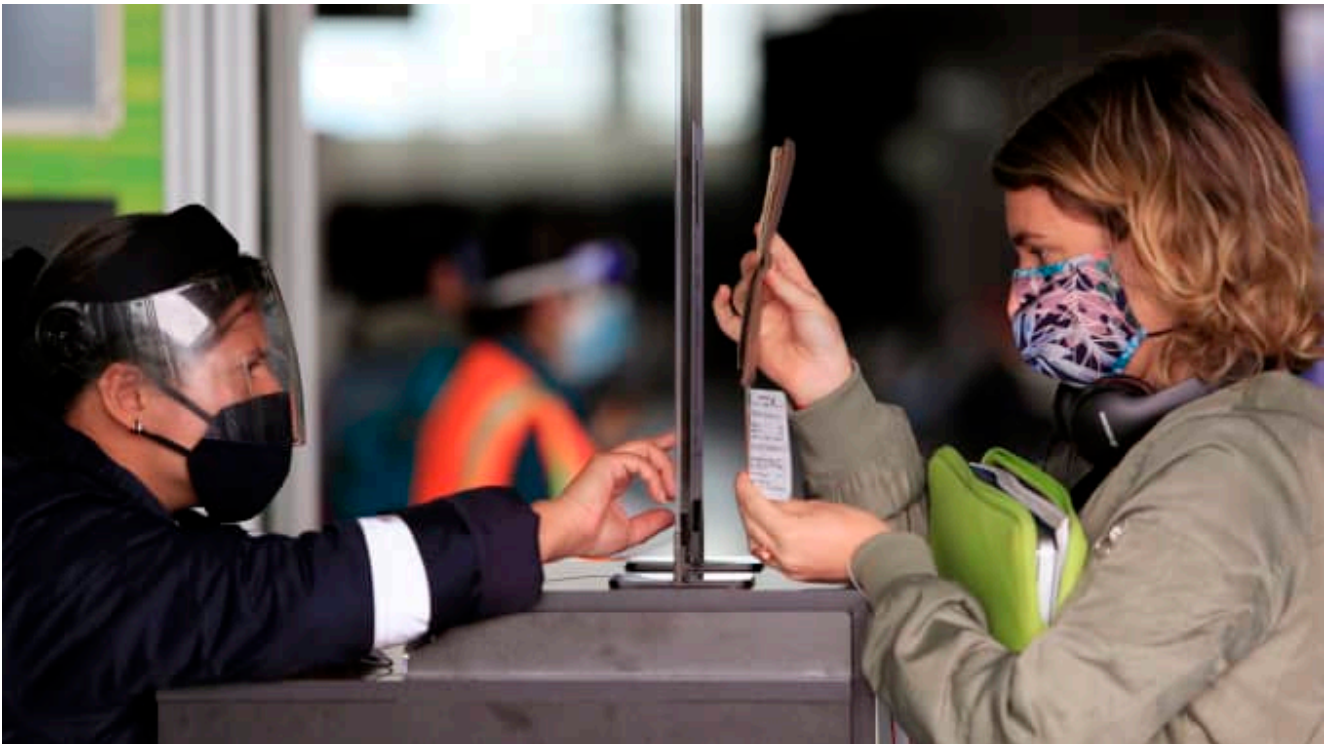# Covid vaccine passports are being considered. And health experts and rights groups are deeply concerned

KEY POINTS

- The U.S., U.K. and European Union are among those considering whether to introduce a digital passport that will allow citizens to show they have been vaccinated against Covid-19.
- It is thought some form of certificate system could help stimulate an economic recovery as countries prepare to relax public health measures over the coming weeks.
- Physicians and rights groups, however, are deeply concerned.

A passenger using a face mask shows her passport and boarding pass to an employee in a security checkpoint at El Dorado International Airport in Bogota on September 1, 2020. DANIEL MUNOZ | AFP | Getty Images

LONDON — Public health officials and civil liberty organizations are urging policymakers to resist calls for coronavirus vaccine passports, at a time when many countries are in the process of reviewing whether to introduce digital passes.

The U.S., U.K. and European Union are among those considering whether to introduce a digital passport that will allow citizens to show they have been vaccinated against Covid-19.

The certificate system could be used for traveling abroad, as well as to grant access to venues such as restaurants and bars.

It is thought a digital passport could help stimulate an economic recovery as countries prepare to relax public health measures over the coming weeks. The ailing airline industry, hit particularly hard by the spread of the virus last year, is among those calling for governments to usher in legislation that supports Covid vaccine passports.

Physicians and rights groups, however, are deeply concerned.

Dr. Deepti Gurdasani, clinical epidemiologist at Queen Mary University of London, told CNBC via telephone that vaccine passports could inadvertently be used to provide "false assurances" to holidaymakers.

"I can see that they might be useful in the longer term, but I have several concerns about them being considered at this point in time when I think the scientific evidence doesn't support them. And there are lots of ethical concerns about them that I think are legitimate," Gurdasani said on Thursday.

Among those scientific concerns, Gurdasani said it is clear the protection coronavirus vaccines offer is "very far" from complete and "we know very little about the effectiveness of vaccines in preventing infection or even asymptomatic disease against several variants circulating in different countries."

In addition, most countries do not have sufficient access to vaccines in order to immunize their populations, and Gurdasani warned a certificate system akin to vaccine passports would discriminate against those populations "even further."

Vacation Plans

President Joe Biden, on his first full day in office last month, outlined a 200-page national coronavirus pandemic strategy. The plan included a directive for multiple government agencies to "assess the feasibility" of linking Covid shots to international vaccination certificates and producing digital versions of them.

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has also ordered a review of vaccine passports, while the European Council is due to meet on Thursday to discuss the next steps of the EU's vaccine rollout and movement across the 27-nation bloc.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson meets Year 11 students during a visit to the Accrington Academy on February 25, 2021 in Lancaster, England. (Photo by Anthony Devlin – WPA Pool/Getty Images) – Anthony Devlin | WPA Pool | Getty Images News | Getty Images

The International Air Travel Association, which represents some 290 airlines from around the world, has seen an increasing number of airlines sign up for its so-called IATA Travel Pass. The initiative is designed to help passengers manage their travel plans and provide airlines and governments with proof that they have been vaccinated or tested for Covid-19.

In a letter seen by EURACTIV, the IATA reportedly called on EU leaders meeting on Thursday to approve vaccine passports and come to an agreement "on the crucial role of secure digital solutions, such as the IATA Travel Pass." IATA was not immediately available to comment when contacted by CNBC on Thursday.

The World Health Organization is not currently keen on vaccine passports. In a statement published on Jan. 28, WHO officials said governments should "not introduce requirements of proof of vaccination or immunity for international travel as a condition of entry" at present.

The United Nations health agency added: "There are still critical unknowns regarding the efficacy of vaccination in reducing transmission and limited availability of vaccines."

'What happens to everyone else?'

A report published by the Economist Intelligence Unit last month projected that the bulk of the adult population of advanced economies would be vaccinated by the middle of next year. In contrast, this timeline extends to early 2023 for many middle-income countries and even as far out as 2024 for some low-income countries.

It underscores the stark divide between high-income and low-income countries when it comes to vaccine access.

"These so-called passports claim they would ensure those who can prove they have coronavirus immunity can start to return to normal life. Which raises the question — what happens to everyone else?" Liberty, the U.K.'s largest civil liberties organization, said in a press release earlier this month.

Airport workers unload a shipment of Covid-19 vaccines from the Covax global Covid-19 vaccination programme, at the Kotoka International Airport in Accra, on February 24, 2021. NIPAH DENNIS | AFP | Getty Images

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"Countless suggestions for immunity passports have circulated. Some suggest their use would be limited to international travel — others are less specific. Meanwhile, a variety of technologies have been floated, from QR codes to apps or even physical cards," the statement continued.

"One thing every suggestion has missed is that it's impossible to have immunity passports which do not result in human rights abuses."

Big Brother Watch, a U.K.-based rights and democracy group, has also warned against the use of vaccine passports, citing implications on privacy and free movement, among other issues.

What happens next?

In a report published on Feb. 14 by the Science in Emergencies Tasking: Covid-19 (SET-C) group at the Royal Society, the U.K.'s national academy of sciences, university professors outlined 12 issues that would need to be satisfied in order to

deliver a vaccine passport.

These included: accommodating for the differences between vaccines in their effectiveness and changes in efficacy against emerging Covid variants, be internationally standardized, be secure for personal data, meet legal standards, and meet ethical standards.

"Understanding what a vaccine passport could be used for is a fundamental question — is it literally a passport to allow international travel or could it be used domestically to allow holders greater freedoms?" Professor Melinda Mills, director of the Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science at the University of Oxford, said in the report.

"We need a broader discussion about multiple aspects of a vaccine passport, from the science of immunity through to data privacy, technical challenges, and the ethics and legality of how it might be used," Mills said.

Source:
https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/25/covid-vaccine-passports-health-experts-are-deeply-concerned.html

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