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## Health passports 'inevitable' as governments seek to reopen borders



An immunity passport based on facial recognition as "a linchpin of a new normality", according to tech experts CREDIT: GETTY

By **Chris Moss**, DESTINATION EXPERT

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With a view to easing lockdown and allowing people to begin travelling again, for work or leisure, several countries are calling for an “immunity passport”. The authorities in some popular European destinations, including Greece, Sardinia and the Balearic Islands, are talking openly about antibody-based passports to enable safe entry for tourists.

Chile’s Ministry of Health recently announced that it would issue “release certificates,” in the form of smartphone QR codes, to those who are 14 days clear of Covid-19 symptoms.

An immunity passport scheme is also being discussed in the UK. In April, Onfido, a firm specialising in digital identity technologies, submitted written evidence on “the role of Digital Identity in Immunity Passports” to the Science and Technology Committee.

Describing an immunity passport based on facial recognition as “a linchpin of a new normality”, the company, which enjoys the financial backing of TPG, Salesforce Ventures and Microsoft’s M12 Ventures, among others, makes the case that domestic travel “is critical to the economic growth and recovery of the UK.”

Onfido CEO and co-founder Husayn Kassai said in a statement: “An immunity passport is a presentable proof of immunity. It is designed to help an individual prove that they have been tested and that their test result belongs to them, but without having to share any personal information.

“We’re in talks with governments and employers to make this process as fast, secure and simple as possible. Our technology is used to tie a physical human being to their digital identity using just a photo of their ID and a selfie video. Once this is bound to a test result, the digital certificate could be displayed similar to a smartphone boarding pass.”

Matt Gould, the CEO of NHSX, the technology wing of the National Health Service, said he had been approached by a number of organisations, but insisted NHSX was in “the very early stages” of considering its options.

Any putative passport would depend on sufficient scientific evidence that antibodies provide immunity. But, according to professor Raj Muttukrishnan, an expert on electronic security at City University, an international travel passport containing information about the bearer’s health is an inevitability.

“The only way to manage travel across EU borders will be to somehow link it to the health data, possibly from the tracing app that will be launched soon. The app will have all our location data and who we came in contact with.

“The app traces the individual’s movement to manage the spread of the virus or a second wave. This [information] would be very useful in the EU where people drive through borders without much checks and can also speed up the border-crossing process instead of, say, thermal imaging cameras.”



Health details could be added to existing passports CREDIT: GETTY

The smart chip in biometric passports contains the same basic information that is printed inside. Some jurisdictions store facial recognition images and fingerprints in passports. Health information could be uploaded to the passport chip, which can work in unison with a smart phone.

“The details can be added into existing passports,” says professor Muttukrishnan. “There would have to be international agreement as to what kind of biometric data will be stored and there must be a consent from the travellers that these will be used for health validation purposes.

“The soft biometrics traits of an individual can be linked to their personal mobile phones whereby they can take a thermal image and verify their health condition in real-time, including their temperature using a thermal scanner in one’s mobile phone.”

While governments have yet to determine a course of action, technology companies are looking into designs for immunity passports and databases. Since mid-April, more than 60 firms, universities and organisations have been working together to develop what they call the Covid-19 Credentials Initiative, a “digital certificate that lets individuals prove (and request proof from others) that they’ve recovered after testing negative”.

Notes of caution are being sounded by human rights lawyers and civil liberties lobbyists, as well as the World Health Organisation, which warns that “people who assume that they

are immune to a second infection because they have received a positive test result may ignore public health advice.”

Writing in *The Lancet*, Alexandra Phelan, a professor in global and public health law and ethics at Georgetown University, argues that “immunity passports incentivise infection”, as people won’t be able to prove they are free to move around until they have had Covid-19, recovered from it, and been given a green light.

There’s nothing new about the tortuous relationship between passports and pandemics. Before the First World War, most people moved across borders with travel documents, work permits and sufficient funds to prove they could pay their way. The 1920 Paris Conference on Passports & Customs Formalities and Through Tickets decided passports would only be adopted as a temporary measure until “pre-war conditions [are] gradually established”.

But the huge death toll of the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-19 put paid to any repealing of passport legislation. At the time, some countries considered including medical records, but the paper technology of the time had limitations – a passport-holder could feasibly alter the information – and no global consensus was ever reached.

An electronic immunity passport, while no panacea, might enable movement within and between countries if they can agree on security and privacy concerns, as well as the terms of what constitutes immunity.

Many countries already have ID cards containing biometric data. While UK governments have shelved discussion of national identity schemes since the National Identity Register was scrapped in 2010, travel is an area where a unilateral approach is unlikely to work.

“If people want to get back to near normal, to travel abroad, have a holiday or go on business, then they will probably have to accept a travel document, which hopefully will become mandatory,” says professor Muttukrishnan.

“It’s no secret that several countries ask for health certificates for foreign employees. A passport scheme will be driven by need and citizens will have to accept it as they will the adoption of the new Covid-19 tracing app.”

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