

Lancet formally retracts 1998 paper linking vaccine and autism

February 2 2010, by Richard Ingham

Medical journal The Lancet Tuesday withdrew a 1998 study linking autism with inoculation against three childhood illnesses, a paper that caused an uproar and an enduring backlash against vaccination.

The British journal said it was acting in the light of an ethics judgement last week by Britain's General Medical Council against Andrew Wakefield, the study's lead researcher.

"We fully retract this paper from the published record," The Lancet's editors said in a statement published online.

The 1998 paper suggested there might be a connection between [autism](#) and a triple [vaccine](#) for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR).

Other experts insisted the claim was spurious, but many parents in Britain were deeply alarmed and refused to have their children vaccinated.

The slump has yet to fully recover today and as a result there has been a rise in measles, placing unprotected young lives at risk, say doctors.

The scare over the vaccine also occurred in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

In 2004, 10 of the paper's 13 authors distanced themselves from part of the study, publishing what they called a "retraction of an interpretation."

In last Thursday's ruling, the General Medical Council attacked Wakefield for "unethical" research methods and for showing a "callous disregard" for the youngsters as he carried out tests.

They included invasive procedures such as spinal taps and colonoscopies for which he had not gained ethics approval, and taking blood samples from children at his son's birthday party for five-pound (eight-dollar, six-euro) payments.

Wakefield was also accused of acting in a misleading, dishonest and irresponsible way in the manner in which he presented the research.

The two-and-a-half-year hearing was one of the longest in British medical history.

"Following the judgement of the UK General Medical Council's Fitness to Practise Panel on January 28, 2010, it has become clear that several elements of the 1998 study by Wakefield et al are incorrect, contrary to the findings of an earlier investigation," The [Lancet](#) said.

The original study looked at 12 children aged between three and 10 who had been referred to the department of paediatric gastro-enterology at London's Royal Free Hospital.

After a trouble-free early life, they developed bowel disease and developmental regression, including loss of communication skills.

The study suggested there could be a "possible relation" to the MMR vaccine, which is administered at around 18 months and again at the age of four years, and said further work was needed to confirm this "syndrome."

Running in parallel to the medical implications of the scare has been a

long-running debate whether one of the world's most prestigious medical journals should have published the paper, ring-fenced it with clearer warnings or retracted it sooner when the flaws first became known.

Despite the furore, Wakefield remains a hero to some parents of children with autism, who portray him as victim of a witch hunt.

Autism is the term for an array of conditions ranging from poor social interaction to repetitive behaviours and entrenched silence.

The condition is rare but seems to affect predominantly boys.

Its causes are fiercely debated.

Theories range from exposure in the womb to the male hormone testosterone, environmental factors after birth and genetic factors, including "sporadic," or accidental, mutations as opposed to inherited ones that are passed down through generations.

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