

# Anxious British parents queue for vaccines as measles rages

April 28 2013, by Ruth Holmes

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Fears about the purported side effects once sent British parents running from vaccinations against measles. But now an outbreak of the potentially deadly disease in one city has brought them back in droves.

As others went about their weekend activities in Swansea on the south Wales coast, a steady stream of parents brought their children to Singleton Hospital to receive emergency vaccines, hoping to protect them from a local epidemic that shows no signs of easing.

Since November, almost 1,000 people around the city have contracted measles, with children aged 10 to 18 affected the worst.

One 25-year-old man who had the disease has died, although tests to ascertain the cause of death proved inconclusive.

The weekend clinics at this "epidemic hotspot", now in their fourth week open, have already attracted more than 6,000 people amid a vigorous [public health campaign](#) to get children vaccinated.

[Health officials](#) unequivocally attribute the [outbreak](#) to a now widely discredited study by [Andrew Wakefield](#) published in 1998 linking the measles, [mumps](#) and rubella (MMR) triple vaccine to autism—the legacy of which is now emerging as unvaccinated people fall ill.

Swansea resident Amanda Jones attended the emergency clinic with her 11-year-old twins Ruth and Megan.

She decided in 2003 to give her daughters a single [measles vaccine](#), instead of MMR, but now fears it may be insufficient.

"We opted for the single vaccine because the girls were born premature and were quite vulnerable. We already had a lot to deal with and it was just an added worry," she told AFP.

"I don't have any fears about MMR now. But that is what happens when you read all these things in the papers. You don't expect something like this (epidemic) to happen."

Doctors are also quick to blame the press and their coverage of Wakefield's research.

The study, published in The Lancet medical journal, sparked a global scare which in Britain led to hundreds of thousands of parents choosing not to have their children immunised in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In 2005 uptake fell below 80 percent—lower still in some parts of the country.

Britain's General Medical Council struck Wakefield off the medical register in 2010, saying he had behaved "dishonestly and irresponsibly".

Swansea family doctor Dai Lloyd said: "That flawed, fraudulent and bogus research undermined, in lots of people's minds, the safety of MMR.

"I recall one mother accusing me of deliberately giving her child autism."

These fears were exacerbated, Lloyd believes, by a "media frenzy" over Wakefield's findings.

"There was a particularly vigorous campaign by the local media here in Swansea," he told AFP. "It was absolutely relentless."

Added to the problem, say doctors, is that the seriousness of measles disappeared from public consciousness.

— 'Extremely nasty illness' —

The highly contagious viral illness, prevalent in developing countries—particularly Africa and parts of Asia—had been almost eliminated in Britain, only to re-emerge in 2007.

Caught through direct contact with an infected person or via coughs or sneezes, its common symptoms are a red-brown rash, fever, and cold-like signs.

But there can be life-threatening complications including pneumonia, blindness, and even brain damage.

"It is an extremely nasty illness," said Lloyd. "People are seeing that now and they are coming to these vaccination clinics in droves."

Mum-of-three Michelle Todd took her two-year-old Kara-Mae for an early second dose of the two-phase vaccine.

"With the number of cases rising more and more, I thought, 'better safe than sorry'," she said, sitting patiently with her lively toddler in the busy waiting room.

"People were scared of the risk of [autism](#) and this is the result of it now. But it proved to be unfounded."

While Wales's second city may be the centre of this [epidemic](#), England

is also witnessing a general rise in measles.

There were 68 confirmed cases in London between January and March this year, among 587 across England. Last year saw a record 2,000 cases across the country.

Dr Shamez Ladhani, a paediatric infectious diseases consultant for Public Health England, told AFP: "Certainly London and other large cities, such as Manchester or Liverpool, could be particularly at risk of a measles outbreak if we do not curb the spread of the disease.

"We need to try to get as many children vaccinated as quickly as possible, to maintain protection for individuals and the population."

English health authorities have launched a £20-million (\$31-million, 24-million-euro) "catch-up" programme aiming to issue one million doses of MMR.

Qualms about the [vaccine](#) appear mostly to have subsided, with England seeing its highest-ever take-up last year.

"The fears are disappearing I think," said Ladhani. "As time goes on the evidence against Wakefield is becoming insurmountable.

"It is easier to justify why MMR is so important."

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