

Britain bans doctor who linked autism to vaccine

May 24 2010, MARIA CHENG , AP Medical Writer



In this photo taken on July 17, 2007 file photo, Dr Andrew Wakefield in London. The doctor who sparked an international vaccine scare by claiming autism was linked to a common vaccine has been banned from practising medicine in Britain, the country's top medical body ruled on Monday. Dr. Andrew Wakefield was the first to publish research suggesting a connection between the measles vaccine and autism. After the vaccine scandal hit, Wakefield moved to the U.S. and set up an autism center in Texas, where he faces similar skepticism from the medical community. (AP Photo/Steve Parsons/PA File)

(AP) -- Britain's top medical group banned a doctor who was the first to publish peer-reviewed research suggesting a connection between a common vaccine and autism from practicing in the country, finding him guilty Monday of serious professional misconduct.

Dr. Andrew Wakefield's research led to millions of parents worldwide abandoning the shot for measles, [mumps](#) and rubella, even though the study was later widely discredited.

Wakefield, 53, then moved to the U.S. and set up an [autism](#) center in Texas, where he has a wide following, but faces similar skepticism from the [medical community](#). The ruling in Britain only applies to his right to practice medicine in the U.K., not in other countries.

Wakefield was not immediately available for comment. He has the right to appeal the ruling, which takes effect within 28 days.

Vaccination rates in Britain have never recovered since Wakefield's research was published in 1998 and there are measles outbreaks in the country every year. The disease is also on the rise in the U.S.

Numerous other studies have been conducted since then and none have found a connection between autism and any vaccine.

Wakefield has been a central figure in the anti-vaccine lobby and has garnered much support from parents suspicious of vaccines, including some Hollywood celebrities. In February, U.S. actress Jenny McCarthy, who has an autistic son, issued a statement with her former partner Jim Carrey.

"It is our most sincere belief that Dr. Wakefield and parents of children with autism around the world are being subjected to a remarkable media campaign engineered by vaccine manufacturers," McCarthy and Carrey

said in February. "Dr. Wakefield is being vilified through a well-orchestrated smear campaign."

Britain's General Medical Council struck Wakefield from the medical register Monday and found him guilty of "serious professional misconduct." The council was investigating how Wakefield and colleagues carried out their research, not the science behind it.

Wakefield and colleagues published a study in the medical journal Lancet in 1998 alleging a link between autism and the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella.

At the time, Wakefield was working as a gastroenterologist at London's Royal Free Hospital and did not have the ethical approval to conduct the study. He had also been paid to advise lawyers representing parents who believed their children had been hurt by the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.

Ten of the study's authors later renounced its conclusions and it was retracted by the Lancet in February.

In 2005, Wakefield founded a nonprofit autism center in Austin, Texas, but quit earlier this year.

In January, Britain's medical council ruled that Wakefield and two other doctors acted unethically and showed a "callous disregard" for the children in their study. The medical body said Wakefield took blood samples from children at his son's birthday party, paying them 5 pounds (today worth \$7.20) each and later joked about the incident.

In a statement then, Wakefield said the medical council's investigation was an effort to "discredit and silence" him to "shield the government from exposure on the (measles) vaccine scandal."

In Monday's ruling, the medical council said Wakefield abused his position as a doctor and "brought the medical profession into disrepute."

In the U.S., several court rulings have found no connection between vaccines and autism. More than 5,500 claims have been filed by families seeking compensation for children believed to have been hurt by the measles vaccine.

At least a dozen British medical associations including the Royal College of Physicians, the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust have issued statements verifying the safety of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.

"I hope this ruling will finally persuade the public and some misguided journalists that Dr. Wakefield behaved irresponsibly," said Dr. Jennifer Best, a virologist at King's College University in London. "(The [measles](#)) vaccine is a safe [vaccine](#)."

More information: General Medical Council's ruling on Wakefield:
<http://www.gmc-uk.org/Wakefield-SPM-and-SANCTION.pdf-32595267.pdf>

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