

Paper on MMR-autism link 'elaborate fraud'

Medical journal accuses doctor of deception

MEDICINE

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A 1998 study that unleashed a major health scare by linking childhood autism to a triple vaccine was "an elaborate fraud", the British Medical Journal charged yesterday.

Blamed for a disastrous boycott of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine in Britain, the study was retracted by The Lancet last year and its senior author disgraced, after the country's longest-running hearing, for conflict of interest and unethical treatment of patients.

But the BMJ, taking the affair further, yesterday branded the paper a crafted attempt to deceive, among the gravest of charges in medical research. "The paper was in fact an elaborate fraud," it said, adding: "There are hard lessons for many in this highly damaging saga."

It pointed the finger at lead author Andrew Wakefield, then a consultant in experimental gastroenterology at London's Royal Free Hospital. Wakefield and his team suggested they had found a "new syndrome" of autism and bowel disease among 12 children. They linked it to the MMR vaccine, which they said had been administered to eight of the youngsters shortly before the symptoms emerged.

Other scientists swiftly cautioned the study was only among a tiny group, without a comparative "control" sample, and the dating of when symptoms surfaced was based on parental recall, which is notoriously unreliable. Its results have never been replicated.

In an interview with CNN, Wakefield denied inventing data and blasted a reporter, who apparently uncovered the falsifications, as a "hit man" doing the bidding of a powerful pharmaceutical industry. "It's a ruthless pragmatic attempt to crush any investigation into valid vaccine safety concerns," he said.

"He is a hit man," he said of Brian Deer. "He's been brought in to take me down because they are very, very concerned about the adverse reactions to vaccines that are occurring in children."

When asked who he meant by "they", Wakefield said Deer "was supported in his investigation by the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industries, which is funded directly and exclusively by the pharmaceutical industry".

The controversial study by Wakefield unleashed a widespread parental boycott of the jab in Britain, and unease reverberated also in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Hundreds of thousands of children in Britain are now unshielded against these three diseases, BMJ said. In 2008, measles was declared endemic, or present in the wider population much like chicken pox, in England and Wales.

Wakefield was barred from medical practice last year on the grounds of conflict of financial interest and unethical treatment of some children involved in the research.

The BMJ, delving into the accuracy of the study as opposed to its ethics, said Deer had "unearthed clear evidence of falsification".

Not one of the 12 cases, as reported in the study, tallied fully with the children's official medical records, it charged. Some diagnoses had been misrepresented and dates faked in order to draw a convenient link with the MMR jab, it said.

Of nine children described by Wakefield as having "regressive autism", only one clearly had this condition and three were not even diagnosed with autism at all, it said.

The findings had been skewed in advance, as the patients had been recruited through campaigners opposed to the MMR vaccine.

And Wakefield had been confidentially paid hundreds of thousands of pounds through a law firm under plans to launch "class action" litigation against the vaccine, it said.

Deer, in a separate report published by the BMJ, compared the scandal with the "Piltdown Man" hoax of 1953, when a supposed fossil of a creature half-man, half-ape turned out to be a fake. The Wakefield study "was a fraud, moreover, of more than academic vanity. It unleashed fear, parental guilt, costly government intervention and outbreaks of infectious disease", he said.

Wakefield, who still retains a vocal band of supporters, has reportedly left Britain to work in the US. At the time of his paper, he told CNN the "truth" was in his book about the long-running scandal.

When asked why 10 of his co-authors retracted the interpretations of the study, he said: "I'm afraid the pressure has been put on them to do so. You're dealing with some very powerful interests here."