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PROFESSION

Regaining trust after vaccine threat debunked

A leading medical journal says MMR vaccine-autism study was fraudulent. Doctors still face a barrage of safety questions from worried parents.

By KEVIN B. O'REILLY, amednews staff. Posted Jan. 24, 2011.

The tide may be turning in the battle to win parents' trust in the safety of recommended child immunizations.

In early January, the editors of influential British medical journal *BMJ* said Dr. Andrew Wakefield had perpetrated an "elaborate fraud" with his 1998 article in *The Lancet* that purported to link autism and bowel disease to the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.

BMJ editors concluded that Dr. Wakefield "altered numerous facts about the patients' medical histories in order to support his claim to have identified a new syndrome" and "sought to exploit the ensuing MMR scare for financial gain." The editors based their findings on the work of British investigative reporter Brian Deer, the author of a series of articles on Dr. Wakefield that appeared in the journal.

In 2010, Dr. Wakefield's license to practice medicine in Britain was revoked, and *The Lancet* retracted his article. In 2009, judges in a special U.S. federal court rejected a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. Many studies have rejected any link between autism and vaccines.

These developments come as government officials and physician organizations have improved communicating the benefits of vaccination while addressing safety concerns, doctors say.

Many physicians greeted the *BMJ* revelations with relief, saying Dr. Wakefield's work caused many parents to doubt the wisdom of immunizing their children. MMR vaccine rates had plummeted in Britain, where cases of the measles and mumps soared into the thousands annually. In the U.S., outbreaks of the measles, pertussis and Haemophilus influenzae type b involved children whose parents opted out of immunization.

"This was a house of cards," said Jay M. Lieberman, MD, referring to Dr. Wakefield's research. Dr. Lieberman is professor of clinical pediatrics at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine and medical director of infectious diseases at Quest Diagnostics Inc. "It just took a decade to understand what fully happened and to expose the complete lack of science behind it and, indeed, the fraud."

After the articles were published in *BMJ*, Dr. Wakefield told CNN that his work was "distorted" and that he is the victim of a "ruthless, pragmatic attempt to crush any attempt to investigate valid vaccine safety concerns."

Dr. Wakefield still has defenders, especially among parents of children with autism. J.B. Handley, who co-founded the activist organization Generation Rescue, now headed by celebrity Jenny McCarthy, told CNN that *BMJ* did "not remotely" discredit Dr. Wakefield's study and merely reprinted Deer's allegations.

The latest news will not dispel every parent's doubts about vaccination, Dr. Lieberman said.

1 in 8 parents has refused at least 1 recommended vaccine for his or her child.

"There's a small, rather hard-core and vocal minority that believes that vaccines are hurting our children," he said. "To the very small minority, no amount of scientific evidence will convince them otherwise. What we'd like to do, as physicians, is reach out to the majority of parents who are simply trying to navigate the information -- and misinformation -- they're getting."

Though parental concerns may persist, physicians can help persuade parents to vaccinate their children by taking time to listen to their worries, directing them to reliable information sources, and advocating for immunization with passion and a personal touch, experts said.

Doctors should go beyond educating patients about the science, said Gary L. Freed, MD, director of the division of general pediatrics at the University of Michigan Health System.

"We should present all accurate available information for parents, including the veracity and the lack of credibility of many of those who have promoted fear of vaccines for their own personal profit and gain," said Dr. Freed, lead author of a March 1, 2009, *Pediatrics* article reporting that one in eight parents has refused at least one recommended vaccine.

The survey of 1,552 parents also found that 25% agreed with the statement, "Some vaccines cause autism in healthy children."

The delicate conversation about immunization safety can turn sour quickly, said Francesco "Chek" Beuf, MD, a Boulder, Colo., pediatrician.

"Discussing vaccination with certain people is like discussing religion or politics," Dr. Beuf said. "It's a matter of deep feelings, rather than facts."

"I try to educate people. I try not to make them feel like idiots."

Physicians should capitalize on their established relationships with patients, said Doug Campos-Outcalt, MD, the American Academy of Family Physicians' liaison to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.

"The foremost point is that people trust their doctors," Dr. Campos-Outcalt said. "Physicians should talk to patients confidently and answer



Even after *BMJ* condemned his research, Dr. Andrew Wakefield continued to defend his integrity. "There was no fraud," he told "Good Morning America" on Jan. 17.
[Photo by AP / Wide World Photos]

their questions in a straightforward way and listen to their concerns."

Advocating for health

At All Star Pediatrics in Exton, Pa., a Philadelphia suburb, parents receive a vaccine policy statement expressing the group's belief in the effectiveness and safety of vaccines.

Parents are discouraged from delaying vaccination, and those who refuse to vaccinate are advised to "find another health care provider who shares your views."

The five-physician practice has been using the statement since 2007 to help allay parents' concerns. Still, the questions keep coming at virtually every visit, said Bradley J. Dyer, MD, the group's founder.

Despite telling parents who refuse immunization to go elsewhere, Dr. Dyer describes his conversations with parents as congenial.

"The approach we use is to say, 'There's bad science, or no science, behind the detractors. We want to do what's best for your child. We're on the same team here,'" Dr. Dyer said.

Physicians definitely should steer clear of chastising worried parents, said Ari Brown, MD, an Austin, Texas, pediatrician and co-author of *Baby 411: Clear Answers and Smart Advice for Your Baby's First Year*.

"Doctors need to remember that these are not bad parents -- they are scared parents, and there is a difference," Dr. Brown said. "Don't make your interactions leave the parent feeling like they are a bad parent for not vaccinating or waiting to vaccinate. ... Parents just want to feel like they are doing all they can to protect their child."

Dr. Brown said concern about vaccines seemed to peak in about 2008 in her practice, and that the tide has begun to turn since then.

"It's been a long decade," she said. "Hopefully, we can close this chapter and move on and have more parents feeling confident in vaccinating their kids."

The print version of this content appeared in the Jan. 31 issue of *American Medical News*.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Stoking vaccine fears with research fraud

February 1998: *The Lancet* publishes an article by Dr. Andrew Wakefield and 12 co-authors that described eight "previously normal children" showing symptoms of colitis and developmental regression shortly after receiving the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. In a news conference, Dr. Wakefield calls for a suspension of the MMR vaccine pending further research.

December 2001: Dr. Wakefield resigns from the Royal Free Hospital.

February 2004: British investigative journalist Brian Deer reports in *The Sunday Times* that some of the parents whose children's cases were described in *The Lancet* article were recruited by a lawyer pursuing a lawsuit against manufacturers of the MMR vaccine, and that the Royal Free Hospital received nearly \$90,000 from a legal board for the research. Ten of Dr. Wakefield's co-authors retract their original interpretation in the 1998 article.

December 2006: *The Sunday Times* reports that Dr. Wakefield was paid more than \$600,000 to conduct his research.

January 2010: After a 217-day hearing, Britain's General Medical Council finds that Dr. Wakefield acted unethically and "with callous disregard for the distress and pain" that children would experience after being subjected to blood draws, lumbar punctures and other tests that were clinically unnecessary and not approved by his hospital's ethics committee. *The Lancet* retracts Dr. Wakefield's 1998 article.

February 2010: Dr. Wakefield resigns as executive director of Austin, Texas-based Thoughtful House Center for Children, which advocates alternative treatments for children with autism and other developmental disorders.

May 2010: The General Medical Council revokes Dr. Wakefield's license to practice in the United Kingdom.

January 2011: Editors of the influential British medical journal *BMJ* say Dr. Wakefield perpetrated an "elaborate fraud" with his 1998 article in *The Lancet*. The journal runs a series of articles by Deer describing how Dr. Wakefield altered medical case histories and detailing his conflicts of interest. In a Jan. 17 interview on ABC's "Good Morning America," Dr. Wakefield says: "There was no fraud. There was no falsification. There was no hoax. ... What I did was respond to parental concerns."

Sources: News accounts, *American Medical News* archives, television show transcripts

WEBLINK

"Wakefield's article linking MMR vaccine and autism was fraudulent," *BMJ*, published online Jan. 5 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21209060)

"Secrets of the MMR scare: *The Lancet's* two days to bury bad news," *BMJ*, published online Jan. 18 (www.bmj.com/content/342/bmj.c7001)

"Secrets of the MMR scare: How the vaccine crisis was meant to make money," *BMJ*, published online Jan. 11 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21224310)

"Secrets of the MMR scare: How the case against the MMR vaccine was fixed," *BMJ*, published online Jan. 5 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21209059)

"Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children," *The Lancet*, Feb. 28, 1998, retracted on Feb. 6, 2010 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9500320)

"Parental vaccine safety concerns in 2009," *Pediatrics*, April 2010 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20194286)

"Evaluating Information About Vaccines on the Internet," National Network for Immunization Information, July 12, 2010 (www.immunizationinfo.org/issues/general/evaluating-information-about-vaccines-internet)

American Academy of Pediatrics' Immunization Alliance (www.aap.org/immunization/about/immunizationalliance.html)

Vaccine Education Center, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (www.chop.edu/service/vaccine-education-center)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on vaccine safety (www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety)

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