

An Injection of Truth

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

In 1998, a British researcher named Andrew Wakefield authored a study linking childhood autism to the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine.

From the beginning, the study had its fair share of red flags — the most obvious being that it was based on a sample of just 12 children. You don't need a degree in statistics or epidemiology to realize that making sweeping generalizations based on a dozen kids is a fairly boneheaded thing to do. Yet the research nonetheless kicked off a veritable parental panic, causing frightened moms and dads in the United Kingdom and abroad to refuse to vaccinate their youngsters. By 2008, so many British parents were refusing the MMR for their offspring that measles was once again declared endemic in the UK — a status the disease hadn't enjoyed in 14 years.

I was mindful of these consequences when reading, this past January, that the *British Journal of Medicine* had declared Wakefield's regrettably influential work "an elaborate fraud." Reporter Brian Deer discovered that not one of the 12 kids in the 1998 study actually had a medical history matching Wakefield's claims, as an investigation of their official records showed. It turned out that Wakefield had recruited the children selectively (mostly from an activist group opposed to vaccines), then altered their diagnoses and the timing of their symptoms to make the subjects' experiences appear to fit his thesis.

This was not the first bit of dirt the dogged reporter Deer had dug up on Wakefield. Several years ago, Deer discovered that Wakefield had been paid for his research (and rather handsomely so) by a group that was suing the manufacturers of the MMR shot. Oh, and Deer also

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learned that Wakefield just happened to have patented his own measles vaccine that the British doctor hoped might replace the evil MMR. Awfully thoughtful of him, wasn't it?

But there is a silver lining to this whole undeniably dark Wakefield/autism cloud. Although it has taken years of hard work, Wakefield has finally been publicly disgraced and exposed for the liar he is.

Deer's reporting played a large role in uncovering the truth, as did the diligent efforts of doctors and medical researchers across the world who conducted endless well-designed (and honest) experiments in a fruitless effort to replicate Wakefield's fraudulent findings.

The Lancet, the prestigious British medical journal that originally published Wakefield's work, helped cement the scientific consensus against the MMR/autism theory by formally withdrawing the 1998 study once the flaws in Wakefield's methods had become clear. Meanwhile, Britain's General Medical Council did its part by conducting a long investigation that resulted in banning Wakefield from practicing medicine in the UK.

It is worth noting that every single one of these corrective actions — all these efforts to right a damaging wrong — were taken without the "help" (otherwise known to faithful *Regulation* readers as coercion) of the government. In the UK, the General Medical Council is a self-regulating body.

Now, if it makes you crazy that despite all these actions, someone like Jenny McCarthy — who has all the medical expertise of a disemboweled grapefruit — is still out there hyping the autism/vaccine link, I can sympathize. It would be nice if there were a little bit less hysteria and a little bit more reason in the debate



about autism's origins. However, having to listen to a *Playboy* playmate wax facile about the menace of mercury is a small price to pay for retaining the freedom to work out such scientific disputes through open debate, research, writing, and journalistic investigation.

Although the Wakefield mess caused the unnecessary resurgence of dangerous (sometimes even fatal) diseases, the way the dispute was handled — transparently and with no overwrought government clampdown — helped get parents thinking calmly about their responsibility in evaluating claims about their kids' health. So where many parents once were inclined to take the first tabloid headline about a subject like autism to heart, many will now resort to a bit more reason and reflection before deciding which risks to their children they are willing to take (or not).

Had government rushed in with laws enforcing mandatory MMR vaccines, Wakefield and the anti-vaccine activists would have become martyrs and the autism panic would have spread even further than it already has. Future valid questions about the MMR and other vaccines might have been suppressed by the authorities and exaggerated by the paranoid public.

Instead, Wakefield has been carefully exposed as a scammer and the world has been reminded about the importance of evaluating evidence and avoiding relying on a single source. In a bizarre way, one disgraced and deceitful doctor may have made us all a little bit healthier. **R**