

MMR vaccine - Co-authors Retract Allegations With Autism.

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The light at the end of the tunnel is glowing clear for parents of toddlers who have been grappling with confusion around the MMR vaccine since 1998. Dr Andrew Wakefield, a British gastroenterologist, was the lead author of the paper that suggested there may be a relation between the MMR vaccine and autism. However, ten of his co-authors have now published a formal retraction of the suggestion of a link in the medical journal, the Lancet. They have strongly disassociated themselves from the idea that the vaccine is somehow related to autism.

Dr Wakefield is also under investigation for alleged failure to declare a financial interest when he submitted his research for publication as he did not mention he was paid £50,000 towards research for a legal action by parents claiming the MMR had harmed their children.

In the original paper Wakefield and 11 medical co-authors described the cases of 12 children who all had some form of developmental delay as well as digestive system problems. Eight of the parents reported that they felt their children's autism was related to the MMR vaccine. While every sympathy must be given to these parents they can not be considered impartial scientific observers. That was the role of the medical team who published their cases. The authors did state in their paper that "We did not prove an association between measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and the syndrome described." However, the implication was made and the subsequent press conferences by Dr Andrew Wakefield hammered home that implication.

The stakes in this issue are very high. As a result of media attention following Wakefield's allegations measles immunisation rates dropped in Britain from 90% to less than 80%. Consequently outbreaks are now occurring putting many children at risk of measles complications like pneumonia, encephalitis (brain inflammation occurs 1 in 2,000) and permanent brain damage. The angst for millions of parents trying to make an informed choice is just immeasurable.

In the last 6 years there has been an unprecedented research response – with major study after major study looking at vast numbers of children (tens of thousands) showing no link with MMR vaccine and autism. This issue has been examined from all angles by leading scientists, parents and lawyers around the world. All the research shows there is no link.

Dr Wakefield's response in the face of crushing critique of his science is to publicly take the stance of mis-understood maverick. As parents it is helpful to realise that Dr Wakefield's theories have not stood the time-honoured tests of basic science: he has conspicuously failed to convince his medical colleagues of his theory, his results have not been replicated, and he has been unable to substantiate his theory in further studies.

Applying good old kiwi common sense to this discussion does help in reaching an informed choice. The finding that Dr Wakefield had very clear conflicts-of-interest which he failed to disclose is a final nail in the coffin of this myth. It is reassuring to know that the most positive outcome from all this has been that more research dollars have now been secured towards investigating more thoroughly the real causes and effects of autism.