



MMR Update

Dr Avril Brereton

Because the MMR issue is so prominent the ACT NOW team has included this second fact sheet on the topic. The following comments are from the [AutismConnect website](#) and are published here without amendment or comment for readers' general information.

Autismconnect June 2006

Returning to the issue of the MMR vaccine, the British doctor who first suggested a link between the triple jab and autism is to be charged with serious professional misconduct, it has been reported. The Independent newspaper in the UK reports that the General Medical Council will accuse Dr Andrew Wakefield of carrying out "inadequately founded" research. Vaccination rates fell sharply after Dr Wakefield questioned the safety of MMR, raising fears of a measles epidemic.

His initial paper in The Lancet has since been disowned by the journal. The editor admitted he would not have published the 1998 paper if he had known about what he called a "fatal conflict of interest." Dr Wakefield was being paid to see if there was any evidence to support possible legal action by a group of parents who claimed their children were damaged by the vaccine. Some children were involved in both studies. In addition, ten doctors who co-authored the 1998 paper issued a statement in 2004 arguing there was insufficient evidence to draw the conclusion that the MMR vaccine was not safe.

The main thrust of the paper was that MMR was linked not only to autism, but also to the bowel disorder Crohn's disease. A host of major studies has since failed to find any evidence of a link between MMR and autism. However, the uptake rate for MMR - a combined jab which protects against measles, mumps and rubella - slumped in the wake of the controversy. The rate has since picked up again, but remains low in some areas of the country, most notably London. The number of measles cases has risen from 4,204 in 2003 to 56,390 in 2005.

The Independent reports that Dr Wakefield will face four charges: that he published inadequately founded research, failed to obtain ethical committee approval for the work,

obtained funding for it improperly, and subjected children to "unnecessary and invasive investigations." The paper says that detailed charges are being formulated by the GMC's lawyers, and will be presented in the autumn, with a public hearing expected last year. If found guilty, Dr Wakefield could be struck off the medical register.

Dr Wakefield, a consultant gastroenterologist, carried out his initial study while working at London's Royal Free Hospital. He has since moved to the United States.

But Jackie Fletcher, of the British support group, Jabs, representing parents concerned about vaccination, said: "The GMC charges are totally unfounded and seem to be a total witch hunt against Andrew Wakefield and the research team. All the researchers did was raise a red flag [about MMR] and say more research was needed." All the doctors are believed to have denied professional misconduct.

Meanwhile, contrary to the findings of some earlier studies, new British research has failed to detect measles virus genetic material in the blood of MMR-vaccinated autistic children with development regression, according to a report in the Journal of Medical Virology for May. As I mentioned above, several epidemiological studies, conducted in various countries, found no support for the association between the MMR and autism, however, in recent years, the controversy again surfaced as researchers reported finding measles virus genomic fragments in tissue samples taken from autistic children.

In the present study, Dr Mohammed Afzal, from the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control in Hertfordshire, UK, and colleagues used several assays to test for measles genome sequences in leukocyte preparations obtained from 15 children with autism who had received the MMR vaccine as part of the routine immunisation schedule in the UK. There was no evidence of measles genomic fragments in any of the children, by any of the methods used. The authors emphasised that the methods were "highly sensitive, specific, and robust" and were capable of detecting "measles virus RNA down to single-figure copy numbers per reaction."

Given the rigorous methods employed, the researchers believe that measles virus material genuinely did not exist in the patient's blood samples. Moreover, "all children examined in this study responded positively to MMR vaccine and developed a normal immune response to the measles component of the vaccine."

Autismconnect July 2006

I mentioned earlier Dr Wakefield's largely discredited theory that the MMR vaccine could be linked to autism and bowel disease. A few days ago, a group of Britain's leading paediatricians and childhood vaccination experts warned that more children would die unless a line was drawn under the autism and MMR controversy.

In an open letter, 30 scientists, including some of the United Kingdom's most eminent child health experts, say that an overwhelming body of evidence showed the vaccine was safe. They added that urgent immunisations were necessary to prevent potentially devastating outbreaks among schoolchildren. The warning came as England faced its biggest measles

outbreak in 20 years, fuelled by the refusal of some parents to have their children immunised. In March, the Health Protection Agency released details of the death of a 13-year-old boy, from the travelling community, who died of measles-related complications. He was suffering from an underlying lung condition for which he was taking drugs which suppressed his immunity.

Last month, the Health Protection Agency reported 449 cases of measles in the UK so far this year - more in just six months than the 438 reported cases in 2003. In 2005, there were only 77 reported cases. In their letter, the scientists raised concerns that many children born during the height of the MMR scare were now set to enter schooling without the immunisation. "We are now faced with a potentially serious situation. Years of low uptake mean large numbers of unprotected children are now entering school. Unless this is rectified urgently, and children are immunised, there will be further outbreaks and more unnecessary deaths," it says.

Although immunisation rates are rising, they are still below the 95 per cent level the World Health Organisation says is needed for "herd immunity." A year ago, MMR uptake stood at 70.8 per cent in London and 83 per cent for the whole of the UK.

The letter adds: "It is not too late to avert this predictable tragedy. It is time that due weight is given to the overwhelming body of scientific evidence in favour of the vaccine. Misguided concepts of 'balance' have confused and dangerously misled patients. We all, media, politicians and health professionals, have a responsibility to protect the health of our children."

David Elliman, a consultant in community child health at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and a signatory of the letter, said that a vast body of research now vindicated the MMR vaccine, but he added that some media reports remained "partisan" in their coverage of research into the vaccine. "Parents should be wary of simplistic headlines and information they read on the Internet," he added.

A raft of major studies has found no evidence that the triple vaccine is unsafe. However, leading doctors are concerned about the way a recent United States study - which found evidence of the measles virus in the guts of children with autism - was reported. One of the American researchers, Dr Stephen Walker, of Wake Forest University Medical Centre in North Carolina, said the findings replicated Dr Wakefield's in establishing a strong association between measles and autistic children with bowel disease. But he warned it did not demonstrate the measles virus was causing either autism or bowel disease.

In their letter, the British scientists say the American research was small-scale, inconclusive, preliminary and riddled with supposition – but this was not reflected in the media reports. And they warn it would be tragic if confidence in MMR, which had begun to return, was undermined as a result. A spokesperson from Britain's Department of Health welcomed the doctors' intervention. "It is extremely important that parents protect their children from these preventable diseases. MMR is the safest and most effective vaccine. We strongly recommend that any parent who wants to make sure their child is up to date with their vaccinations contact their local surgery."

But Jackie Fletcher, of the campaigning group, Jabs, said the fact that measles virus had been found in the intestines of some children with autism had still not been explained. She said the doubts over MMR would not "go away at the stroke of a pen." She added: "They would like to draw a line through these children and pretend they don't exist," she said. "Some of these doctors are responsible for epidemiological studies that have looked at data and concluded MMR is safe. But we have been asking for almost 10 years - and were promised by a former Health Minister - that there would be a clinical study of the children, and we're still waiting."