

Autism/vaccine data faked: report

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The British doctor whose 1998 paper fueled fears of a now-discredited link between childhood vaccines and autism manipulated and changed data to make his case, the *Sunday Times* of London reports.

An investigation by the newspaper found that Dr Andrew Wakefield and his colleagues altered confidential and public records to support their claim that eight of 12 autistic children attending a routine clinic at Wakefield's hospital had developed symptoms of autism only days after they were given the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine.

Wakefield's original findings, published in *The Lancet*, have since been refuted by many subsequent epidemiological studies.

Symptoms preceded jab

According to the *Los Angeles Times* Brian Deer, an investigative reporter for the *Sunday Times* who had been following the MMR controversy since the beginning, said a review of hospital and other records showed that almost all of the children had developed symptoms of autism before receiving the shot.

While Wakefield claimed that measles virus found in the intestines of the children caused an inflammatory bowel disease linked to autism after they were given the shot, Deer found that hospital pathologists examining the children for signs of inflammatory bowel disease were unable to confirm its presence in most of the cases, and concluded that Wakefield, or someone on his team, altered the data to make it appear that the condition was found, the *Los Angeles Times* said.

Deer also reported that at least one parent of a child in whose intestines the measles virus was said to have been found took samples to three other labs, which were unable to confirm Wakefield's findings.

Deer also found that Wakefield had been retained as an expert witness two years before his study by a lawyer planning to sue vaccine makers on behalf of parents who thought the MMR shot caused their children's problems. Deer said the parents cited in *The Lancet* article came to Wakefield's clinic after responding to an advertisement by the lawyer's group, called Jabs, and not for routine screening, the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

Professional misconduct

Meanwhile, Wakefield and two co-authors, Dr John Walker-Smith and Dr Simon Murch, face allegations of professional misconduct brought by England's General Medical Council, which oversees physicians. Those charges, according to the *Sunday Times* of London, are not related to the newspaper's investigation, but rather to the researchers' ethics in using the children. The newspaper said it was forwarding all its data to the medical council for review.

Through a lawyer, Wakefield has denied the newspaper's allegations and continues to stand by his original conclusions. In 2004, however, 10 of the 13 original authors on *The Lancet* paper asked that it be withdrawn, saying that "no causal link was established between MMR vaccine and autism because the data was insufficient," the *Sunday Times* of London said.

Since Wakefield's original claims, the newspaper reported that vaccination rates in Great Britain have fallen from 92 percent to less than 80 percent. As a result, two children have died of measles, and 1 348 cases of the disease were reported in England and Wales in 2008, where only 56 were reported in 1998, when Wakefield's study was first released.
