

The Guardian



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Andrew Wakefield struck off register by General Medical Council

MMR-autism controversy doctor portrays himself as a victim of British establishment pragmatism

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Mon 24 May 2010 20.25 BST

Andrew Wakefield, the doctor who triggered anxiety among parents over his suggestion of a link between the MMR vaccine and autism, was struck off the medical register today for offences relating to dishonesty and failing to act in the best interests of vulnerable child patients.

But as leading doctors and medical institutions condemned him and hailed an end to the controversy which caused measles, mumps and rubella vaccination rates to drop dangerously low, Wakefield launched a fresh war of words from New York, portraying himself to the media as a victim of the British establishment and insisting he would fight on in the interests of children with autism.

Speaking to the Guardian, he said the General Medical Council's decision to remove him from the register was "predictable and inevitable".

He said: "It seemed to me that they had come to this decision a long time ago, long before the evidence was fairly heard. This is the way the system deals with dissent. You isolate, discredit and provide an example to other doctors and scientists not to get involved in this kind of thing. That is examining questions of vaccine safety."

At the end of the GMC's longest case, lasting 217 days, a disciplinary panel found Wakefield guilty of serious professional misconduct on a number of charges relating to a paper published in the *Lancet* medical journal in February 1998, some of them related to research ethics and others to financial conflicts of interest and failing to put patients first.

Young and vulnerable children were subjected, in the interests of research, to invasive medical procedures such as colonoscopies and lumbar punctures which they did not need and the ethics committee of the Royal Free hospital in north London, where Wakefield was based, had not approved. "The panel is profoundly concerned that Dr Wakefield repeatedly breached fundamental principles of research medicine," the GMC said.

The GMC also struck off Professor John Walker-Smith, 73, who retired 10 years ago as head of the Royal Free's department of paediatric gastroenterology, where the panel conceded he was held in high esteem. The panel accepted he posed no danger to patients and "was and remains a well-respected doctor whose contribution to paediatric medicine has been exemplary". Nonetheless, the GMC said he had failed in the care of vulnerable children and was guilty of "irresponsible and misleading reporting of research findings potentially having such major implications for public health".

A third doctor, Simon Murch, at the time a junior consultant but now professor of paediatrics and child health at Warwick medical school, was cleared of serious professional misconduct. He had raised concerns about the research project and acted in good faith under the instructions of his superior, Walker-Smith.

As he walked out into the sunshine today, Murch was applauded by waiting demonstrators, carrying banners and placards declaring GMC Conflicted, not Wakefield, GMC Used Fake Charges and One Jab Does Not Fit All.

Wakefield denies that the doctors acted unethically. After he was struck off he told the *Guardian*: "This is just ruthless pragmatism - how the system deals with doctors who step out of line. We as physicians responded to parental concerns as we should have done. We did exactly the right thing. These children had been ignored, their symptoms had been ignored and in particular the association parents made with the vaccine had been ignored."

Wakefield said the decision to investigate the children was taken by one of the world's leading gastroenterologists, Walker-Smith, on the basis of the children's symptoms. "It wasn't research, it was clinical investigation of symptoms. This was made absolutely clear from the beginning going back to 1996."

Fear of a possible link to autism led to substantial drops in MMR take-up and deaths in 2006 and 2008, but Dr David Elliman, consultant in community child health at Great Ormond Street hospital for children, and Dr Helen Bedford, senior lecturer in children's health at the centre for epidemiology and biostatistics at UCL, said in a statement that parents appeared to be regaining confidence. "The alleged link between autism and MMR vaccine had been disproved long before the GMC hearings even began. Hopefully the whole episode can now be laid to rest," they said.

Adam Finn, professor of paediatrics at University of Bristol medical school, said society tended to admire those who stick to their opinions. But in science, "the real heroes are those who

acknowledge the supremacy of evidence and retain an open mind and those who admit, with good grace, when they are wrong ... I remain disappointed that Dr Wakefield still does not acknowledge all the evidence that now exists that shows MMR is safe and supports its use."

Michael Fitzpatrick, GP and author of *MMR and Autism: What Parents Need To Know*, said: "My thoughts are with the families of autistic children who were dragged into futile litigation (more than 1,000 in the UK, more than 5,000 in the US) on the basis of Wakefield's speculative link between MMR and autism.

"Wakefield's greatest offence was his failure - over 12 years - either to substantiate a hypothesis with major consequences for child health or to withdraw it."

Timeline

February 1998 The Lancet publishes Andrew Wakefield's study linking autism to MMR, sparking a drop in uptake and a rise in measles

March 1998 Medical Research Council panel, ordered by government, finds no evidence to support Wakefield's claim

December 2001 Wakefield leaves his post at the Royal Free hospital

February 2004 Sunday Times claims parents of some children in the study were pursuing a legal case against MMR makers and Wakefield was being funded by Legal Aid Board to investigate a link

March 2004 Ten of the 12 co-authors of the 1998 paper withdraw support for Wakefield's autism-MMR link claim

2005 MMR uptake falls to 81%

June 2006 GMC investigation begins into alleged misconduct

July 2007 Appears at the GMC disciplinary hearings, denying misconduct

January 2010 GMC panel finds Wakefield guilty of serious professional misconduct during research for his paper

February 2010 Lancet retracts Wakefield's paper

24 May 2010 Struck off by the GMC

Katy Stoddard

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