

Do Vaccines Cause Autism? An Activist Group and Trial Lawyer Scare Campaign Endangers Children and Threatens the Progress of Medicine

By Martin Morse Wooster

Summary: Despite a total debunking of one of the great scientific frauds in modern times, many parents continue to believe that vaccines are responsible for autism in children. Misguided activists and unscrupulous trial lawyers are promoting this deceit. The result: a decline in childhood immunization is producing an increase in measles, whooping cough and other infectious diseases once thought eradicated for good.

This January, the *British Medical Journal*, one of Britain’s leading medical publications, published a lengthy report by investigative journalist Brian Deer about a 1998 paper published in *The Lancet*, another prominent British medical publication. The paper in *The Lancet* was by Andrew Wakefield, John Walker-Smith, and 10 other scientists at London’s Royal Free Hospital and Medical School. It reported that the scientists had looked at 12 children who had received the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine. They had reached a stunning conclusion: there was a strong connection between the MMR vaccine and autism.

Wakefield’s paper has been one of the most influential—and notorious—medical papers of our time. In the U.S., both “60 Minutes” and the *New York Times Magazine* ran extensive pieces reporting on the alleged connection between vaccines and autism. In Britain, Wakefield’s research was even the subject of a movie of the week. (Hugh Bonneville, who recently starred in the PBS Masterpiece Theatre series “Downton Abbey,” played Wakefield.¹) In 2001 Prime



Comic actress Jenny McCarthy is a leading proponent of the myth that there is a link between child vaccines and autism.

Minister Tony Blair went so far as to refuse to say whether or not his 19-month old son was vaccinated.²

Rep. Dan Burton (R-Indiana) held a House hearing in 2000 at which scores of parents claimed their children became autistic after getting vaccinated. Burton said his own grandson was normal until he “received nine shots in one day,” after which he “quit speaking, ran around banging his head against the wall, screaming and hollering and waving his hands.”³ Last January the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized that Burton was “especially irresponsible in raising public fears” about vaccines.⁴ Democratic senators also acted irresponsibly. As Amy Wallace reported in *Wired*, former Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Connecticut) and Sen. John Kerry

(D-Massachusetts) “have both curried favor with constituents by trumpeting the notion that vaccines cause autism.”⁵

As a result of widening public fears, vaccine rates have fallen around the world, and childhood diseases like measles and whooping

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cough, once consigned to the history books, have begun making comebacks. The paper by Wakefield and his associates that showed the posited link between vaccines and autism was fraudulent. But it has taken over a decade for this news to push back against a rising tide of anxiety and sensationalism over immunizing children.

Only last year did Britain's General Medical Council, after a hearing that lasted over 200 days, finally revoke the licenses of both Wakefield and Walker-Smith, ensuring they are unable to practice medicine in the United Kingdom. In February 2010 *The Lancet* formally retracted Wakefield's paper.

Government Money and Trial Lawyers

Over the years, Brian Deer has published several investigative stories showing the gaping flaws in Wakefield's research. But his article this year in the *British Medical Journal* goes further. Deer previously had shown that Richard Barr, a British trial lawyer seeking to organize a lawsuit against vaccine manufacturers, was secretly funding Wakefield. In the two years before the 1998 publication of his *Lancet* paper, Wakefield secretly received £435,643 in payments from

Barr, which he received by billing Barr £150 (or \$230) an hour.

The funds Barr used to pay Wakefield came from the Legal Services Commission, a quasi-governmental organization roughly equivalent to the Legal Services Corporation in the U.S. The LSC gave Barr £18 million, two-thirds of which went to Barr's law firm and one-third to the doctors and scientists. The commission cut Barr's funds in 2003, and after Deer exposed this subsidy in 2006, the commission announced that it would no longer directly fund scientific research. Wakefield's colleagues say he did not disclose to them at the time of his research that someone planning to sue vaccine manufacturers was using government funds to support his research.

In his recent *British Medical Journal* article Deer reveals that Barr actively solicited prospective clients and urged them to see Wakefield. He was particularly interested in finding parents who opposed MMR vaccination. Wakefield, Barr wrote, "has deeply depressing ideas about the effects of vaccines...He is also anxious for tests to be carried out on any children...who are suffering signs of possible Crohn's disease. The following are signs to look for. If your child has suffered from all or any of these symptoms could you please contact us and it may be appropriate to put you in touch with Dr. Wakefield."

Wakefield's paper claimed that the 12 patients he studied had developed a "new syndrome" of "regressive autism" after having had the MMR shot. But Deer's careful research found that:

*Three of the nine children reported as having "regressive autism" were never diagnosed as autistic.

*Wakefield's paper said all twelve children were normal before receiving a vaccination, but five of the 12 had "documented pre-existing developmental concerns" before being vaccinated.

*The paper said several children had the

behavioral symptoms of autism within days after being vaccinated, but "the records documented these as starting some months after vaccination"—long after any jury could reasonably conclude that a child's behavioral problems were caused by a vaccine.

Publicizing the Fraud

Deer's latest exposé has drawn praise from both right and left. "How many of you have been persuaded that vaccines have caused autism?" Rush Limbaugh told his listeners on January 6. "It's all a fraud, all a lie."

"We have a story here, 'Study Tying Vaccine to Autism Was Fraud,'" Limbaugh said later on his broadcast. "We've got people saying, 'Well, maybe so, but it's still true.' 'Cause people want to believe this stuff. It's human nature, believe crisis, believe conspiracy, believe people are out to kill you, companies are out to kill you.'"⁶

Reached by CNN in Davos, Switzerland, at the annual convention for the rich and powerful, the world's most generous philanthropist, Bill Gates, agreed with Limbaugh.

"Dr. Wakefield has been shown to have used absolutely fraudulent data," Gates said. "He had a financial interest in some lawsuits, he created a fake paper, the journal allowed it to run. All the other studies were done, showed no connection whatsoever again and again and again. So it's an absolute lie that has killed thousands of kids. Because the mothers who heard that lie, many of them didn't have their kids take either pertussis (i.e. whooping cough) or measles vaccine, and their kids are dead today. And the people who go and engage in those anti-vaccine efforts—you know, they kill children. It's a very sad thing, because these vaccines are important."⁷

Unfortunately, news travels slowly. A Harris Interactive/HealthDay poll conducted in late January finds that only 52 percent of Americans surveyed believe that vaccines don't cause autism. Eighteen percent said vaccines do cause autism, while 30 percent said they aren't sure. Only 47 percent of the people polled knew there were problems with Wakefield's paper.⁸

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Scientists have received hate mail and even death threats for publicizing the fraud. Dr. Paul Offit, head of the Division of Infectious Diseases at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, is the author of *Autism’s False Prophets* (Columbia University Press, 2008) and *Deadly Choices* (Basic Books, 2010), among the more important books exposing the myth that vaccines cause autism. Science journalist Dr. Harriet Hall notes that Dr. Offit received “a direct death threat that got the FBI involved. He had to use a bodyguard and cancel a book tour. One threatening phone call ominously declared that the caller knew Offit’s children’s names, ages, and where they went to school.”⁹

The campaign against Offit extends to the web. Offit’s official website is paul-offit.com. Omit the hyphen and search under pauloffit.com, and you’ll find a website that says it is “exposing the truth about the vaccine industry’s most well-paid spokesperson, Dr. Paul Offit.” (The anti-Offit website, however, hasn’t been updated since 2009.)

Journalists who publicly express doubt about the purported vaccine-autism link place their lives in peril. In *Autism’s False Prophets*, Offit reports on what happened to *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer Kimberly Strassel after she reported on the growing skepticism that thimerosal causes autism. Thimerosal is a preservative containing mercury that is used in some vaccines.

“A woman called our office,” Strassel said. “She was very pleasant. But her goal wasn’t to talk to me about the editorial. It wasn’t to try to convince me or to argue with me. It was to confirm that I was the person who had written it. The next thing I knew my name and my contact details had been published on the Internet and circulated to those parents groups. They wanted to put my name and details out so that there could be a direct assault on a person. They want people. They want names and faces.”

Strassel began receiving vicious emails from anti-vaccine advocates, including some that made veiled threats against her children. “Editorial writing inspires great passions

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Psychiatric disorders, including autism, are difficult for people to understand. Some say autism is not well understood even in the scientific community so it’s not surprising that medical doctors disagree about what constitutes autism, its causes, and treatments.

Autism is actually a blanket term that describes many individual conditions and disorders. It can be useful to think of autism as a spectrum of psychological conditions marked by widespread abnormalities of social interactions and communication, in addition to limited interests and repetitive behavior.

Here are some common definitions for autism:

* Abnormal self-absorption, usually affecting children, characterized by lack of response to people and actions and limited ability to communicate. (*Collins English Dictionary*)

* A psychiatric disorder of childhood characterized by marked deficits in communication and social interaction, preoccupation with fantasy, language impairment, and abnormal behavior, such as repetitive acts and excessive attachment to certain objects. It is usually associated with intellectual impairment. (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

* A developmental disorder that appears in the first 3 years of life, and affects the brain’s normal development of social and communication skills. (National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine)

* A pervasive developmental disorder of children, characterized by impaired communication, excessive rigidity, and emotional detachment. (*Random House Dictionary*)

-Editor

among people, and if you don’t have a thick skin, you shouldn’t be in this business,” Strassel said. “I’m very used to having people telling me that I’m wrong or that I’m stupid or unethical. But I’ve never had a situation where people claimed that I was killing their children, where people suggested that I was part of some grand conspiracy between politicians and corporations to ruin their lives. And I never had anyone suggest to me that I should worry about my own family.”

Why are anti-vaccine advocates so passionate? Part of the reason is that medicine doesn’t currently have good explanations for what causes autism or why the number of autistic children is increasing. But as writer Amy Wallace noted in *Wired*, people have

a tendency to “pattern match.” Autism is usually diagnosed among children who are between 18 and 24 months old, “which happens to be the time where children receive multiple vaccinations.”

It’s a well-known scientific axiom that “correlation does not imply causation”—in other words, just because two events take place at the same time doesn’t mean they’re connected. But stressed-out and concerned parents are easily susceptible to groups that argue that vaccines “obviously” cause autism—and that anyone who dares question this is “obviously” a tool of giant pharmaceutical corporations.¹⁰

The Anti-Vaccine Lobby

There are dozens of nonprofit groups in the United States eager to provide parents with all the “proof” they need to make sure their children don’t get vaccinated. Here are two of the major groups critical of vaccines.

The National Vaccine Information Center.

In his book *Denialism*, Michael Specter, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, writes that the National Vaccine Information Center “certainly sounds like a federal agency. Actually, it’s just the opposite: the NVIC is the most powerful anti-vaccine organization in America, and its relationship with the U.S. government consists almost entirely of opposing federal efforts aimed at vaccinating children.”

Barbara Loe Fisher founded the center in 1982. Among anti-vaccine advocates, Amy Wallace notes, Fisher is “indisputably the movement’s brain.”¹¹ She founded the NVIC in 1982. She told the *New York Times Magazine* in 2001 that in 1980 her 2-½ year old son “suffered a convulsion, went into shock, and lost consciousness for six hours a few hours after his fourth DPT shot. He was left with minimal brain damage that took the form of learning disabilities and attention-deficit disorder.” Fisher added that she kept her remaining children off most vaccines, and that in 1993 her five-year-old daughter “had a particularly bad case” of whooping cough and coughed “until she was blue in the face.”

Both the center and Fisher have been strong supporters of Andrew Wakefield, who received the organization’s Humanitarian Award in 2009. “The Wakefield inquisition is a spectacle designed to persuade all doctors contemplating the safety of current mass vaccination practices to remain silent,” she wrote in a blog entry on the NVIC website.¹² In January 2010, after Wakefield and Walker-Smith were stripped of their licenses to practice medicine, she declared the investigation of Wakefield an “inquisition” and saluted Wakefield and his colleagues “for having the intellectual honesty, conscience, and courage to stand up for truth and freedom in science.”¹³

Amy Wallace, in her *Wired* article, asked Dr. Offit his opinion of Fisher. “She lies,” Offit said. Fisher then sued Wallace, Offit, and *Wired*’s publisher, Condé Nast, for defamation. She lost. In a March 2010 ruling, Judge Claude M. Hilton declared that “Several Fourth Circuit cases make clear that including a remark by one of the key participants in a heated public health debate stating that his adversary ‘lies’ is not an actionable defamation” but “a protected expression of opinion.”

Generation Rescue. Lisa and J.B. Handley founded Generation Rescue in 2005, but its leader is actress Jenny McCarthy. Six weeks after the group was founded, McCarthy visited its website. McCarthy says the information she found there helped her son “recover” from autism. J.B. Handley told the *Bloomington (Indiana) Alternative* that McCarthy “really runs the day-to-day operations. Jenny is the engine, life, chief fundraiser, bottle washer, you name it. She is the lifeblood of the organization and the public face.” Handley said his role now is to “hang out in the cheap seats and opine and write my own stuff and challenge people.”¹⁴

One of Generation Rescue’s first activities was to fund a *New York Times* advertisement denouncing the use of thimerosal in vaccines. The group’s public relations firm was Fenton Communications, the influential go-to PR shop for leftists that became famous for the scare campaigns it launched against breast implants and Alar. The ad which appeared on June 8, 2005 was titled “MERCURY POISONING AND AUTISM: IT ISN’T A COINCIDENCE.” The ad cited politicians supportive of its view, including Sen. Kerry, Sen. Joe Lieberman, Indiana’s Rep. Burton, and Florida Republican Rep. Dave Weldon, who had introduced legislation to ban thimerosal from vaccines. The ad also cited Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who claimed that “mounting evidence suggests that Thimerosal...may be responsible for the exponential growth in autism and other childhood neurological disorders now epidemic in the United States.”

At the time of the Fenton campaign Kennedy

was giving interviews and writing pieces, including one article that appeared in *Salon.com* and *Rolling Stone* (June 16, 2005). It alleged that the Centers for Disease Control was protecting the pharmaceutical industry by concealing evidence linking thimerosal to autism. The article was so error-ridden that both *Salon* and *Rolling Stone* have removed it from their websites. Last January, over five years after its publication, *Salon*’s editor at the time, Joan Walsh, said, “Continued revelations of the flaws and even fraud tainting the science behind the connection” between vaccines and autism “make taking down the story the right thing to do.”¹⁵

Kennedy’s environmental credentials—he is a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and was mentioned as a possible Obama appointment to head EPA—are widely known. But as Cato Institute senior fellow Walter Olson noted in a 2008 *Forbes* article, Kennedy “is listed as being of counsel with the Florida-based firm of Levin Papantonio, which is known for its very successful environmental suits and other mass torts. For whatever reason, when whipping audiences into a frenzy against business and its environmental sins, Kennedy seldom alerts audiences to his financial involvements with contingency-fee lawyers suing over these sins.”¹⁶

When Jenny McCarthy became Generation Rescue’s president, her celebrity secured her appearances on “20/20,” “Oprah,” “Larry King Live,” and other talk shows where she promoted her claim that her son Evan was “cured” of autism through the use of “alternative” therapies such as massive amounts of vitamins, diets free of glutens and casein, aromatherapies, and even spoons rubbed on his body. When Oprah Winfrey asked McCarthy whether what she did was scientific, McCarthy replied, “My science is Evan. He’s at home. That’s my science.”

However, many scientists wonder whether Evan is autistic. As journalist Karl Taro Greenfeld noted in a 2010 article in *Time*, “Evan’s symptoms—heavy seizures, followed by marked improvement once the seizures were brought under control—are

similar to those of Landau-Kleffner syndrome, a rare childhood neurological disorder that can also result in speech impairment and possible long-term neurological damage.” Another possible explanation for Evan’s “cure,” says Greenfeld, could simply be “a delayed 2-year-old catching up by the time he is 7, a commonplace, routine occurrence, nothing more surprising than a short boy growing tall.”

Both McCarthy and Handley have expressed support for Andrew Wakefield. McCarthy issued a statement, posted on the Generation Rescue site in February 2010 (but since removed): “It is our most sincere belief that Dr. Wakefield and parents of children with autism around the world are being subjected by a remarkable media campaign engineered by vaccine manufacturers.”

McCarthy declared that Britain’s General Medical Council is “a kangaroo court where public health officials in the pocket of vaccine makers serve as judge and jury.”¹⁷

“Before you know it, the headline basically read, ‘Wakefield lied, all vaccines are safe,’” Handley told the *Bloomington Alternative*. “What a remarkable spin job. What a remarkably dishonest thing to say.”¹⁸

Conclusion

Of course, no vaccine is 100 percent safe. But nearly a dozen studies published in respected medical journals have found no connection between MMR vaccine and autism.

Anti-vaccine advocates have never been able to find any evidence that vaccine manufacturers control the medical boards of the publications refuting Wakefield’s allegations. They have no reason to believe that pediatricians who tell parents that their babies and toddlers need to get their “shots” are being manipulated by drug companies.

As for thimerosal, the state of California outlawed the use of this compound in vaccines used in that state. But a 2008 study by the California Department of Developmental

Services states, “The data do not show any recent decrease in autism in California” as a result of the statewide thimerosal ban.¹⁹

It’s tragic that parents are not getting their children vaccinated because diseases such as measles and whooping cough are starting to make comebacks. The website JennyMcCarthyBodyCount.com lists the toll: according to the Centers for Disease Control, between June 2007 and April 2011 there were 77,177 preventable illnesses and 712 preventable deaths of children who could have been vaccinated but weren’t.²⁰

Science journalist Michael Fumento interviewed one of these parents, Danielle Romaguera of New Orleans. Her daughter Gabriella died of whooping cough when she was a month old. That’s too young for a baby to be vaccinated. But it’s because other children did not get their shots that whooping cough, once nearly eradicated, is reappearing in cities like New Orleans.

“People need to know they can infect other parents’ babies,” Romaguera said. “It kills. People think these diseases don’t exist anymore but that’s because children are being vaccinated.” Romaguera added that “Our pediatrician says parents tell him all the time they don’t care what the science says. And because of it, babies and kids are dying.”

Parents and groups that fervently believe vaccines cause autism and that champion Andrew Wakefield as a hero need to answer a simple question: what about the children who get sick or die from measles, whooping cough, or other diseases once eradicated by mass vaccination? What would they say to the parents of these children?

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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon
President

PhilanthropyNotes

President **Obama** again proposes to cap the income tax deduction for charitable giving by the affluent, claiming the extra money that would otherwise support nonprofits is needed to support government spending. The plan unveiled last month would over time reduce the value of itemized deductions for higher earners by almost one third, the Chronicle of Philanthropy reports. “The plan calls for limiting itemized tax deductions, including those for charitable donations, to 28 percent for taxpayers in the highest brackets,” down from the present maximum of 35 percent (which is scheduled to increase to a maximum of 39.6 percent in two years).

The **Clinton Climate Initiative**, a project of the **William J. Clinton Foundation**, plans to merge with C40, a coalition of cities led by New York Mayor **Michael Bloomberg**. The group calls for government controls over carbon dioxide emissions and supports mass transit.

After decades of denials, **Robert Meeropol**, the younger son of **Julius** and **Ethel Rosenberg**, told the New York Times that his father deserved to be found guilty of the charges that led to his parents’ execution. “Yes, he was guilty of conspiracy to commit espionage,” Meeropol said. Meeropol’s charity, the **Rosenberg Fund for Children**, provides services to the children of imprisoned activists.

The **Internal Revenue Service**’s electronic filing system was somehow compromised, allowing identity thieves to misuse tax-related information on file with the agency. More than 2,000 nonprofits were affected. The IRS refused to comment.

Goldman Sachs WATCH

The U.S. Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations released a scathing report accusing Goldman Sachs of manipulating markets and providing poor counsel to clients. “In my judgment, Goldman clearly misled their clients and they misled Congress,” said Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), accusing the bank of profiting at the expense of its clients during the mortgage market meltdown four years ago. A Goldman spokesman said, “While we disagree with many of the conclusions of the report, we take seriously the issues explored by the subcommittee.”

Although the company’s profit fell by 51 percent last year CEO Lloyd Blankfein took home \$14.1 million, \$1 million over the previous year. Goldman more than doubled its spending on Blankfein’s car and driver, shelling out \$185,110 for the pair.

It looks like Goldman employees like potential presidential candidate Mitt Romney. According to OpenSecrets.org, individuals affiliated with Goldman were the biggest donors to Romney’s Free and Strong America PAC, coughing up \$231,000 in the last election cycle.