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Lancet retracts study linking vaccine to autism

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The prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet* medical journal has formally retracted a flawed paper that drew a link between autism and the childhood vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella.

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The decision Tuesday comes 12 years after British doctor Andrew Wakefield suggested in the sensational study that the combined vaccine, dubbed MMR, appeared linked to autism and bowel disease.

The finding has since been widely discredited, and last week, the General Medical Council, the body that licenses doctors in the U.K., ruled that Wakefield and two researchers acted unethically in conducting their study.

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Lancet said Tuesday in its short statement that, in light of the GMC ruling: "It has become clear that several elements of the 1998 paper by Wakefield et al are incorrect... Therefore we fully retract this paper from the published record."

After Wakefield's study appeared, many in the medical community



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criticized the research, noting that the study looked at only 12 children, a sample size too small to assess statistical significance. They also worried about "selection bias" and noted the study did not include a control group.

But the paper caused a huge sensation and led to thousands of parents refusing to give the vaccine to their children. That has been followed in recent years by a worrying rise in measles cases and childhood vaccine refusal rates in the United Kingdom.

Doctors say the study damaged parents' faith in vaccines.

"This has damaged the culture of vaccination for children, which is one of the greatest health advances in the last century," Dr. Evdokia Anagnostou of Bloorview Kids Rehab told CTV News.

While health experts say 95 per cent of children need to receive the MMR



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vaccine to confer "herd immunity," take-up rates in the UK stand have not budged past 82 per cent in recent years. In 2006, a 13-year-old boy who had not had the vaccine, died from measles, the first measles death in the U.K. in 14 years.

The Lancet issued a partial retraction of the paper in 2004, accusing Wakefield of a "fatal conflict of interest." The journal said it didn't know at the time of publication that Wakefield was being paid as a consultant to lawyers who wanted evidence to sue MMR vaccine manufacturers on behalf of the parents of children with autism.

Wakefield was reportedly working with lawyers on the lawsuit two years before journal published his paper.

Around the same time, 10 of the study's 13 authors renounced its conclusions and dissociated themselves from the paper.



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Tuesday's full retraction from *The Lancet* goes further, noting that the research was fundamentally flawed. It noted there was a lack of ethical approval and fundamental problems with the way the children's illnesses were presented.

The General Medical Council launched an investigation into Wakefield's study practices in 2007. Last week, in a 143-page ruling, it decided that Wakefield had broken research rules and acted unethically in his study method.

It noted Wakefield and his team had subjected some of the children to invasive tests such as lumbar punctures and colonoscopies that they did not need, without ethical approval. The disciplinary panel ruled Wakefield's team had shown a "callous disregard" for the suffering of children and had brought the medical profession "into disrepute."

Wakefield, a gastroenterologist who

has lived and worked in the U.S. since 2001, and two of his former colleagues – Prof. John Walker-Smith and Prof. Simon Murch – now face being stripped of their right to practise medicine in Britain.

Wakefield continues to defend his work and now works at Thoughtful House, a treatment centre for children with developmental disorders, in Austin, Texas.

"The allegations against me and against my colleagues are both unfounded and unjust, and I invite anyone to examine the contents of these proceedings and come to their own conclusion," Wakefield said in a statement provided by Thoughtful House.

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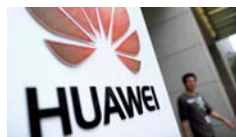
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