

The Conspiratorial repercussions of Wakefield's controversial study

This essay endeavours to prove that, despite the paper being retracted and the study being proven to be extremely financially motivated, Wakefield's study attempting to prove a link between autism, the MMR virus, and non-specific colitis has become the foundations upon which anti-vaccine rhetoric has been built upon. The false belief that vaccines are dangerous has since proven to be worrying, not only for its ableist implications, but also for the fact that it appears to be the beginning of people believing even more extreme and often bigoted conspiracies.

In 1998, then doctor, Andrew Wakefield published a study in the Lancet journal which attempted to link non-specific colitis¹ to autism and as a byproduct find a definitive cause for autism². The paper lists the behavioural diagnoses of the 12 child participants and what their parents identify as their 'exposure', this meaning how the parents viewed, within this eight of the twelve blamed the MMR vaccine with one even attempting to blame an ear infection present a week before they noticed autistic symptoms in their child. Some parents stated that they saw a change in their child between two weeks to mere hours after immunisation. However, this method placed a large amount of basis on the parents' opinions instead of scientific evidence. The paper later admits there is no proven connection between non-specific colitis, autism, and the MMR vaccine. Many believe that this is an instance of correlation being confused for causation³ as signs of autism are generally first noticeable at around twelve to eighteen months old⁴ whereas the MMR vaccine is first given at twelve to fifteen months old in the UK⁵.

All of the children within the study appeared to have similar bowel issues which was then used to imply that the MMR vaccine causes issues with the bowel, causing autism to develop. Wakefield then used this link to create a diagnosis which combined non-specific colitis and autism called 'Autistic Enterocolitis' and believed that the combined vaccine may cause this disorder.

¹ Cleveland Clinic, *Colitis: Symptoms, What it is, Types & Treatment* (2022)

<<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/23384-colitis>> [accessed 20 November 2023]

² The Lancet, *RETRACTED: Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children* (1998)

<[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(97\)11096-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(97)11096-0/fulltext)> [accessed 6 November 2023]

³ Scientific American, *The Truth (and Lies) of Correlation vs Causation* (2013)

<<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/correlation-vs-causation/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

⁴ US Department of Health and Human Services, *When do children usually show symptoms of Autism?* (2017) <<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism/conditioninfo/symptoms-appear>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

⁵ NHS, *MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine* (2020)

<<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/mmr-vaccine/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

The media then sensationalised these apparent findings through fear mongering advertisements and segments within national news services⁶⁷. Despite push back from many other doctors attempting their own press conferences disproving the link, journalists doubled down⁸. However, one journalist wasn't fully convinced and so Brian Deer looked into the situation in more depth.

In 2004 Brian Deer released his documentary "MMR: What They Didn't Tell You"⁹ on Channel 4 and uncovered many suspicious happenings surrounding the now famous study, the most shocking of which being Wakefield's measles vaccine patent¹⁰. This was particularly interesting as, within the UK, if you want to split the MMR vaccine into the three individual vaccinations you have to pay sixty pounds per vaccine which can easily be used to suggest a financial incentive for Andrew Wakefield to suggest taking each individually. Interestingly, the "Neuro Immuno Therapeutics Research Foundation" was listed on the patent along with its owner, disgraced former doctor, Hugh Funderburg. However, by the recording of Deer's documentary the business had already shut down.

Within his further research, Deer uncovered even more damning evidence that Wakefield was incentivised by monetary gain to come to the conclusions within his study. This was found in the form of an undisclosed agreement between Andrew Wakefield and litigator Richard Barr in which Wakefield was paid £150 pounds an hour from the UK legal aid fund, equating to £435,000 or around eight times his yearly salary, in order to provide proof that the MMR vaccine caused illness within children¹¹. Barr felt that there could be potential millions in bringing a class action lawsuit against MMR manufacturers on behalf of the parents of autistic children. However, they needed to prove that the vaccine caused a distinct and specific syndrome which can be used to explain why Wakefield ensured he created a term for this new syndrome, Autistic Enterocolitis.

This overwhelming evidence that showed how Wakefield stood to gain from the findings of his study led the General Medical Council to open up a fitness to practise investigation against Wakefield in 2009¹². This was the longest investigation in their history, lasting 217 days. By 2010 the council had concluded that Wakefield had failed in his duties as a doctor

⁶ BBC, *Child vaccination linked to autism* (1998) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/60510.stm>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

⁷ BBC, *MMR: Every parents choice* (2002) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/1775369.stm>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

⁸ National Library of Medicine, *Media misled the public over the MMR vaccine, study says* (2003) [accessed 6 November 2023]

⁹ 'MMR what they didn't tell you', Dispatches, Channel 4, 18 November 2004, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ubl8opM6TM>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹⁰ Google Patents, *Pharmaceutical composition containing transfer factor for treatment of inflammatory bowel disease and regressive behavioural disorder* (1998) <<https://patents.google.com/patent/GB2341551A>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹¹ Brian Deer, *Andrew Wakefield: the fraud investigation* (n.d.) <<https://briandeer.com/mmr/lancet-summary.htm>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹² General Medical Council, *Fitness to Practise Panel Hearing* (2009) <https://www.channel4.com/news/media/2010/01/day28/GMC_Charge_sheet.pdf> [accessed 6 November 2023]

and acted against the interests of his patients, leading him to get struck off of the medical register¹³ and causing the Lancet to formally retract Wakefield's study after 12 years¹⁴.

In the aftermath of these events Wakefield moved to America, where he was swiftly accepted by the political right¹⁵. Wakefield now speaks at anti-vaccine conferences including “conspira-sea” a conspiracy themed cruise¹⁶ having now changed his tune on vaccination, claiming that all vaccines are dangerous having spoke out against the Covid - 19 vaccine¹⁷. Due to his absence and therefore the absence of media covering his now incredibly controversial study, United Kingdom vaccination rates slowly but surely returned to pre-scare levels¹⁸. The same cannot be said, however, for America as in a 2016 survey of healthcare professionals on the most common reasoning for refusing vaccination 77% of parents cited fear of a connection to autism¹⁹.

This is especially worrying as, for many, following anti-vaccine rhetoric is the first step in believing more in depth conspiracy theories and therefore radicalisation²⁰. The majority of these extremist theories are steeped in anti semitic hate^{21,22} and can often lead to large bouts of violence. For instance, British MP Andrew Bridgen was expelled from his party²³ just this year after he claimed that the Covid - 19 vaccination is ‘the biggest crime against humanity since the holocaust’ in a now deleted tweet. Understandably, such harsh words, in this case

¹³ The British Medical Journal, *Wakefield is struck off for the “serious and wide-ranging findings against him”* (2010) <<https://www.bmj.com/content/340/bmj.c2803>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹⁴ National Library of Medicine, *Lancet retracts 12-year-old article linking autism to MMR vaccines* (2010) <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831678/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹⁵ The Guardian, *How disgraced anti-vaxxer Andrew Wakefield was embraced by Trump's America* (2018)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jul/18/how-disgraced-anti-vaxxer-andrew-wakefield-was-embraced-by-trumps-america>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹⁶ Popular Mechanics, *Climb aboard, ye who seek truth!* (2016)

<<https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/a21919/conspiracy-theory-cruise/>>

¹⁷ The Sun, *Deadly Conspiracy Disgraced British MMR scandal doctor Andrew Wakefield now claiming coronavirus is a HOAX in new anti-vaccine campaign* (2020)

<<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/12149075/andrew-wakefield-claiming-coronavirus-is-a-hoax/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹⁸ NCBI, *Percentage of children receiving first dose of MMR before 24 months in London, rest of England and Scotland, 1999–2000, 2015–16* (2019)

<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK545996/figure/ch6.fig1/?report=objectonly>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

¹⁹ Statista, *Most common reasons given to U.S. health care professionals by families for refusing vaccines or requesting alternative schedules as of 2016* (2016)

<<https://www.statista.com/statistics/665592/reasons-families-refused-vaccinations-health-care-professionals-us/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²⁰ Huffington Post, *Online Anti-Vax Communities Have Become A Pipeline For QAnon Radicalization* (2020)

<https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/qanon-anti-vax-coronavirus_n_5fbeb0c0c5b61d04bfa6921a> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²¹ Time, *The History of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories, from the Rothschilds to George Soros* (2023)

<<https://time.com/6311698/antisemitism-conspiracy-theories-rothschild/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²² The GW Hatchet, *Researchers find far-right conspiracy theories drive antisemitism, violence* (2023)

<<https://gwhatchet.com/2023/11/06/researchers-find-far-right-conspiracy-theories-drive-antisemitism-violence/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²³ Politico, *British MP expelled from Tories after comparing COVID-19 jab to Holocaust* (2023)

<<https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-mp-andrew-bridgen-expelled-tory-party-compare-covid-19-vaccine-holocaust/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

both making light of the holocaust and of those who lost their lives to covid, are incredibly likely to cause offence and as such trigger a defensive reaction in many. However, this has been shown to be incredibly ineffective at deradicalising those who follow these beliefs.

Research has shown that, for most, the drive to believe conspiracies is often rooted in a need to be able to understand and feel safe, sometimes even needing a way to feel superior to others^{24,25}. This may explain why, when directly challenged, they too go on the offensive as in their eyes the challenger is attacking the very way they view the world and their sense of safety within it. This therefore means that, in order to help such people, they instead need to be shown other ways to experience these important things and only then can the idea that they may have been wrong begin to take hold. This does not, however, seem to be the case 100% of the time.

It has been 13 years since Wakefield was proven incorrect and lost his licence and despite that knowledge being readily available the anti-vaccine movement is alive and well, still parroting the theory he started all the way back in 1998. Whilst I do believe that many turn to this belief as a means of explaining how their child became autistic, I also believe that there may be a slightly more sinister reasoning behind it.

Worldwide around 134,000 people die of measles every year and within every 1,000 children affected one to two will die, not to mention those who die from pneumonia developed by one out of every twenty or the one out of 1,000 who are left with hearing loss or intellectual disability²⁶. These numbers are thankfully kept at bay by the millions who are vaccinated allowing themselves to not be infected and preventing the spread. As a direct result of Wakefield's study, however, many are choosing to forgo these vaccines for their children as they are too worried about the possibility of their child being autistic. This is evident that anti-vaccine beliefs are rooted in ableism²⁷ specifically against autistic people as they would rather take the risk that their child would be part of those who either die or are permanently damaged from measles as opposed to taking the risk, in their opinion, that their child could become autistic²⁸.

²⁴ Ohio Capital Journal, *How do we de-radicalize? Three experts in political extremism and violence share ideas* (2021)

<<https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2021/02/08/how-do-we-de-radicalize-three-experts-in-political-extremism-and-violence-share-ideas/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²⁵ APA, *Why some people are willing to believe conspiracy theories* (2023)

<<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/06/why-people-believe-conspiracy-theories>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²⁶ CDC, *Measles* (2019)

<<https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/newsroom/topics/measles/index.html#:~:text=Worldwide%2C%2036%20cases%20of%20measles,from%20measles%20in%20young%20children.>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²⁷ ABC, *When I read anti-vax posts by 'wellness' advocates, what I see is ableism. Here's why* (2021)

<<https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/why-anti-vax-posts-about-building-natural-immunity-are-ableist/100470512>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

²⁸ Quartz, *What vaxxers and anti-vaxxers are missing: Autism isn't the worst thing to happen to a child* (2015)

<<https://qz.com/340623/what-vaxxers-and-anti-vaxxers-are-missing-autism-isnt-the-worst-thing-to-happen-to-a-child>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

Andrew Wakefield lost his medical licence for a myriad of reasons relating to his 1989 study, including his clear attempt at financial gain through his findings. This, however, has not deterred people from misinterpreting and whole-heartedly believing what they believe to be its conclusion, that all vaccinations are dangerous especially for children as they cause autism. For some, this may simply be an attempt at finding the answers that no other brief has been able to provide and dissuade the idea that their child's autism is somehow a failure on their part²⁹. This sense of community and belonging creates a belief system that is incredibly hard to break down but it is my belief that this is needed. If these, possibly ableist, beliefs are allowed to continue unchecked then many more people will fall down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole, not to mention how lower vaccination rates can be credited with many outbreaks including those in the United Kingdom in 2002³⁰ and, more recently, those in the United States in 2019³¹. Many take for granted what a privileged position being able to refuse vaccines is, in the 1940's people lined up to take the smallpox vaccination with New York vaccinating 6 million people in less than a month³² and there are currently countless appeals attempting to gain funds to vaccinate those in less economically developed countries³³. Vaccination hesitancy, I believe, is understandable. Many don't understand how they work and for some the idea of getting a vaccination is incredibly daunting. However, modern anti-vaccine rhetoric can largely be attributed to one man attempting to satiate his greed through fear mongering tactics and preying on those who are desperate for answers and support. Although, it is hard to believe that anyone, even Wakefield, could have ever anticipated what his attempts would result in.

²⁹ Medium, *Why do we still blame moms for autism?* (2017)

<<https://medium.com/the-establishment/why-do-we-still-blame-moms-for-autism-8598ff80a0a3#:~:text=Leo%20Kanner%20based%20his%20groundbreaking,dysfunctional%20relationship%20with%20their%20children.>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

³⁰ NCBI, *Measles outbreaks in UK linked to fears about MMR vaccine* (2002)

<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC100893/>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

³¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, *Red Book Online Outbreaks: Measles* (2023)

<<https://publications.aap.org/redbook/resources/15187/Red-Book-Online-Outbreaks-Measles?autologincheck=redirected>> [accessed 21 December 2023]

³² New York Times, *How New York City Vaccinated 6 Million People in Less Than a Month* (2020)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/nyregion/nyc-smallpox-vaccine.html>> [accessed 6 November 2023]

³³ UNICEF, *Donate doses now* (2021) <<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/donate-doses-now>> [accessed 6 November 2023]