

## PUBLIC DUPED BY MEDIA OVER MMR

This was the headline-grabbing claim emerging from a survey published on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2003 by the Economic and Social Research Council (1). On cue, the British press promoted yet another piece of idiot science from the anti-MMR campaign.

According to research carried out at the Cardiff University School of Journalism, 53 per cent of those surveyed at the height of the media coverage of the MMR controversy in early 2002 believed that, because both sides of the debate received equal media coverage, there must be equal evidence for each. Though almost all scientific experts rejected the claim of a link between MMR and autism, only 23 per cent of those interviewed were aware that the bulk of evidence favoured supporters of the vaccine.

'MMR raises risk of brain disorders say researchers' proclaimed the *Daily Mail* on 20 May 2003. Yet another report undermining public confidence in MMR turned out to be based on a statistically flawed study using unreliable data. A similar study by the same authors, professional anti-immunisation campaigners Mark and David Geier, was condemned by the American Academy of Paediatrics for using data inappropriately and for containing 'numerous conceptual and scientific flaws, omissions of fact, inaccuracies and misstatements' (2).

Doctors and scientists often blame the media for provoking health scares and fears about new developments. In response, journalists point the finger at maverick medical and scientific authorities who have either sponsored or supported particular controversial viewpoints. It is true that the MMR-autism link was first proposed by a mainstream gastroenterologist (Dr Andrew Wakefield) working at a prominent teaching hospital (the Royal Free in North London) and published in an eminently respectable medical journal (*The Lancet*).

Though the media has played a secondary role in the unfolding of the MMR controversy, the Cardiff study and the reporting of the Geier study raise important questions about whether the story has been handled in a socially responsible - or journalistically rigorous - manner.

There have been two phases in the media treatment of the MMR-autism link. In the three years following the appearance of Dr Wakefield's paper that first suggested the link in February 1998, the issue was largely the preserve of specialist health reporters in the broadsheet newspapers. They reported Dr Wakefield's case against MMR and the mainstream response in a balanced way. The tone was sceptical towards Dr Wakefield and tended to affirm the benefits of the mass immunisation programme. After January 2001, MMR became a major political issue: Dr Wakefield questioned the safety of the national immunisation campaign, and the integrity of those running it, and the Chief Medical Officer launched a campaign of reassurance.

The demand for separate vaccines gathered momentum over the next 12 months, receiving a major boost in December 2001 when Tony Blair conspicuously evaded questions about whether his son Leo had received his MMR jab. Media coverage reached a peak in February 2002 when a BBC *Panorama* programme presented a broadly sympathetic account of Dr Wakefield's case. The responsibility for covering MMR passed from reporters with expertise in scientific and medical issues to general feature writers and political correspondents. While the broadsheets now adopted a more sympathetic line towards Dr Wakefield, the tabloids - especially those hostile to the government - now jumped on the anti-MMR bandwagon.

*'Shame on officials who say MMR is safe'* declared Lorraine Fraser in the *Daily Telegraph* on 21 January 2001, inaugurating a new phase of anti-MMR campaigning in the media. This article is largely based on an 'exclusive interview' with Dr Wakefield, who is described as 'a champion of parents who feel that their fears have been ignored'. It provides an uncritical account of Dr Wakefield's MMR-autism thesis and of his latest paper questioning whether MMR was adequately tested before its introduction in 1988.

The article also records Dr Wakefield's denunciation against the Department of Health for failing to recognise his work and for refusing to comply to his demand for separate vaccines. This piece set the tone for a series of anti-MMR articles by Fraser (around one every month over the next two years). These reveal a close contact with Dr Wakefield and his supporters and openly endorse the anti-MMR campaign.

The *Telegraph's* endorsement of the anti-MMR campaign was not limited to Fraser's biased articles. On 8 June 2002 its Saturday magazine carried a major feature by Justine Picardie, who describes Dr Wakefield as 'a handsome, glossy-haired charismatic hero to families of autistic children in this country and America'. Clearly infatuated, she fantasises about a Hollywood depiction of Dr Wakefield's heroic struggle, with Russell Crowe playing the lead 'opposite Julia Roberts as a feisty single mother fighting for justice for her child'.

The Cardiff study, carried out at Cardiff University, provides a penetrating analysis of media coverage of the MMR controversy. Compared with reports of scientific issues such as climate change and genetic research, MMR was 'most likely to be the main focus, it generated more bulletins, more letters and was given longer coverage on TV, radio and in the press' (3).

The authors note the generally uncritical treatment of Dr Wakefield's position, commenting that 'the connection between the MMR vaccine and autism is a speculative claim made by Wakefield with questionable scientific data to support it'. Despite this, they continue, 'Wakefield's claims were not comprehensively or systematically challenged in media coverage', with the result that 'the weakness of empirical evidence in support of Wakefield's claim was never fully aired'.

Though some journalists were satisfied merely to echo Dr Wakefield's views, many did try to balance their reports by indicating that the bulk of evidence supported the safety of MMR. Yet, 'attempts to balance claims about the risks of MMR jab tended merely to indicate that there were two competing bodies of evidence'.

Surveys conducted by the Cardiff team revealed that, between April and October 2002, 70 percent of people regarded the issue of Leo Blair's immunisation as public interest. For those confused about who to trust, this was an important indicator of the government's faith in its own position. In brief, was the government's support for MMR deeply felt or merely tactical and strategic? Leo Blair might, therefore, be reasonably seen as a test of the government's confidence in its own position. The fact his father failed this test gave further column inches to the media

In a telling table, the Cardiff report records that when parents appeared as sources in newspapers, 37 were anti-MMR, 7 pro-MMR; on TV, the balance was 10-3; on radio, 5-0. The authors comment that 'the use of anecdotal evidence from a selective (and unrepresentative) group of parents might also be regarded as unhelpful for such an important matter of public policy'. They conclude pointedly that 'these points matter' because the media presentation of the MMR issue 'appears to have led to a loss of confidence in the vaccine in Britain', the potential public health consequences of which are very serious.

The authors of the Cardiff study indicate that it was beyond their responsibility to account for the failure of journalists to question Dr Wakefield's claims. However, they acknowledge that, in the climate created by the BSE/CJD scandal, journalists were more receptive to a self-proclaimed maverick: they 'were unwilling to discount the possibility that he may be right'. Yet from the perspective of a school of journalism, it might be considered more alarming that so few journalists were prepared even to consider the possibility that Dr Wakefield was wrong. Indeed, so powerful had the anti-MMR consensus in the media become that Lorraine Fraser was hailed as the 2002 'health reporter of the year' at the British press awards!

Why did the British media fall for Dr Wakefield? Perhaps in part it was the enduring appeal of what the American mathematician Norman Levitt calls the 'Galileo myth', 'the idea of the lone noble genius whose insights transcend those of his narrow-minded peers and who consequently faces scorn and persecution for his advocacy of unconventional truth' (4).

Taking Dr Wakefield at his own estimation, the British press failed to realise that 'while Galileo was a rebel, not all rebels - only a tiny fraction - are Galileos'. Galileo could only have dreamed of the sort of backing that Dr Wakefield has received from the British press. Fortunately, he was able to substantiate his scientific claims, something Dr Wakefield has conspicuously failed to do in the five years since he first advanced his hypothesis.

Perhaps more significant is the fact that journalists are a key element of the professional middle-class social constituency that is at the centre of the refusal of MMR. Numerous journalists, as celebrity parents, have voiced anxieties in their columns about MMR and, almost exclusively, to their sympathies with the anti-MMR campaign. The list includes Nigella Lawson (*The Times*), Allison Pearson (London *Evening Standard*), Libby Purves (*The Times*), Suzanne Moore (*Mail on Sunday*), Lynda Lee-Potter (*Daily Mail*).

For these columnists, writing about immunisation issues follows the principles of the 'journalism of attachment' popularised in recent military conflicts: it requires a high level of emotional engagement but no specialist knowledge of the subject. The basic qualification is having a child; a friend or relative with an autistic child is a bonus. All that is then required is a few words with Dr Wakefield and a copy of the Daily Mail.

It was not surprising that the Cardiff study attracted little substantial coverage in the British press. The latest study published by Mark and David Geier (5) claiming that MMR may be a factor in up to 15 percent of cases of autism and other neuro-developmental disorders was reported, first in the GP magazine *Pulse* on 19 May, then on the BBC News website on 19 May and in the *Daily Mail* on Tuesday 20 May. These reports followed an earlier account of the Geiers' researches, by the veteran anti-immunisation reporter Rosie Waterhouse, in the *Daily Telegraph* on 7 April.

Mark Geier is an American genetic counsellor; his son David is a graduate student who runs MedCon, a firm providing advice to families pursuing litigation claims over alleged vaccine injury. Though neither has any academic or professional expertise in any discipline relevant to immunisation, the Geiers feature prominently in the conferences and websites of autism parents and other anti-immunisation groups in the USA.

The report in the *Telegraph* in April was published in the *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons* (6). This sounds impressive, but turns out to be a recently relabelled Medical newsletter, distinguished by its commitment to the practice of private medicine and its hostility to immunisation. The Geiers' latest paper is published in *International Pediatrics*, another apparently impressive title; this one is the house journal of the Miami Children's Hospital.

Parents facing the decision about whether to give their children MMR (and parents of autistic children whose burden is now increased by unwarranted fears that they may have made their children autistic by giving them MMR) have been ill-served by the media's uncritical treatment of the anti-MMR campaign. There has been very little real journalism regarding this issue, in its place we are force fed tabloidisation. Rather than viewing the MMR debate as an important issue concerning a large proportion of the present and future population,

it has been used as a trowel to undermine the government and sell illustrated toilet paper to the masses.

This spectacle should be used for years to come in essays about the power of the media, because the uninformed majority form their opinions from tabloid newspapers, not just for pub discussions, but for making decisions about their lives. This is the real power of the media; third rate subjective journalism brainwashing all that are too busy or lazy to question what is written or presented for their entertainment pleasure.

## Bibliography

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