

MMR VACCINE AND AUTISM: PARENTS CAN PUT THEIR FEARS TO REST!

by Eve Krakow

Over the last seven years, concern that the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine might cause autism has led to much agony for parents as they weighed the pros and cons of getting their child vaccinated. But a recent study that looked at over 5,000 children and found no link between MMR and autism should finally put parents' fears to rest.



“People have to remember what it means not to vaccinate a child. About one million children worldwide die each year from measles”

The controversy began in 1998, when Dr. Andrew Wakefield reported a possible association between the vaccine and autism. Although subsequent studies failed to substantiate this claim, the damage was done. Parents were worried; vaccination coverage levels dropped.

This latest study looked at the medical records of over 5,000 children born in 1973 or later to determine whether MMR vaccination is associated with an increased risk of autism or other pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs). It used the U.K. General Practice Research Database, which contains data on several million individuals in the U.K. To conduct their study, the researchers generated a sample of about 1,400 children with autism or other PDDs.

“We found no evidence whatsoever for any association between MMR and autism,” says Éric Fombonne, Canada Research Chair in Child Psychiatry, and one of the study’s researchers. He notes that this kind of case-control study is very precise. *“It would be highly unlikely that there would have been any effect of MMR that we would not have captured.”*

He believes this new evidence will help change people’s attitude towards the vaccine. *“Our study adds a new, major piece of evidence. Now it’s up to first-line health professionals to be convincing about this study*

and to say, there is absolutely no evidence of this association.”

“People have to remember what it means not to vaccinate a child,” he adds. *“About one million children worldwide die each year from measles.”* And while most of these deaths occur in developing countries they occur in developed countries too. He cites the case of Ireland where, in 1999, following the MMR scare, vaccination coverage was down to 74%. This led to a massive epidemic, in which 150 children became severely ill and three children died.

Dr. Emmett Francœur, a pediatrician at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, says that while the scare did not cause vaccination coverage levels to drop significantly in Canada, it has led to lengthy discussions with parents whenever it was time for a child to get the MMR vaccination. He says this new study is extremely reassuring.

“Because this was a case-control study and was so carefully done, and included samples prior to the time that this issue was even discussed in the population, it carries a lot more weight than all the other studies,” he explains. *“So we feel a lot more confident now saying there really is no association.”*

“This new evidence sends a clear and firm message,” he says. *“When talking eyeball to eyeball with a parent who’s worried about his or her child, if there’s any molecule of doubt left in your body, he will notice it. Now, with this study, the molecules of doubt have been dissipated.”* ❧