

At last, after a GMC investigation that has blighted Dr Andrew Wakefield's life for 12 years, it's... Judgement day for the MMR rebel

From Sally Beck

IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

THE longest and most complex disciplinary hearing ever held by the General Medical Council will reach a conclusion on Friday. Dr Andrew Wakefield, the gastroenterologist who in 1998 raised the possibility of a link between autism, bowel disease and the MMR jab, will learn whether he has been found guilty of ethical breaches in research methods.

Since June 2007, Dr Wakefield and two colleagues have faced an unprecedented inquisition that has cost in excess of £1 million. The verdict has been postponed four times.

But even if Dr Wakefield is found guilty of serious professional misconduct, he will have to wait another six months for the bureaucratic wheels to turn at the GMC to discover whether he will be struck off.

Yet Dr Wakefield is no Harold Shipman. His supporters suggest that his only 'crime' was to voice concerns about MMR which embarrassed the Department of Health.

His detractors, meanwhile, say he needlessly sparked a public panic which led to a prolonged slump in the number of children being vaccinated and a consequent rise in measles and mumps.

While Dr Wakefield, 52, believes the GMC should vindicate his professional reputation, in an exclusive interview with *The Mail on Sunday* he said he fears a 'political' verdict.

"My lawyers feel confident that we have answered all the charges against us," he said from his home in Austin, Texas. "If there's any justice, we should be cleared. However, there's the political backlash to consider. I fear the GMC will want to make an example of us."

"The issue was not about me, but about how to crush dissent. I scare the establishment because I care and I am diligent. I think they're terrified because they've not done adequate safety studies."

'Ignoring concern would have been negligent'

I've been treated in the standard way in which people who raise these kinds of questions are treated.

"It's extremely challenging, but if I fail to stand up to the bullies, the price to be paid is enormous."

The controversy began when his paper outlining a link between autism and bowel disease – but which didn't directly blame the MMR vaccine – was published in *The Lancet* in February 1998.

In 2001, he was forced out of his job at London's Royal Free Hospital over allegations that his research was flawed, and went to work in America.

And in 2004, he was accused of secretly being paid by solicitors acting for parents who believed their children had been harmed by the MMR jab.

Worse still, the editor of *The Lancet* said his journal would never have accepted Dr Wakefield's 'fatally flawed' paper if it had known of the alleged conflict of interest.

The editor asked the 13 co-authors of the paper to sign a retraction of any 'interpretation' of a causal link between MMR and autism, and ten agreed.

"But we were being asked to retract

"I fear they want to make an example of us, but if I don't stand up to the bullies, the price to be paid is enormous"

an interpretation that we hadn't made," explained Dr Wakefield. "The interpretation was that the MMR vaccine caused autism. We had never said that, so we couldn't retract it."

Only two of Dr Wakefield's colleagues, Professor John Walker-Smith and Professor Simon Murch, still stand by *The Lancet* paper. They, too, are being 'tried' by the GMC.

Dr Wakefield uprooted his wife Carmel and four children from their home in London in 2004 to join him in the US, where he carries on his research today.

Meanwhile, a growing body of research from around the world appears to show no evidence of a link between MMR and autism, while the slump in vaccinations in this country has resulted in outbreaks of both measles and mumps, from which at least one child has died.

But Dr Wakefield is unrepentant. "I've never said don't vaccinate," he insisted. "I made it clear that children should continue to be protected using single vaccines. It was the Government's withdrawal of the option of the single-measles vaccine which has led to this problem. Parents who were concerned about MMR safety were given no alternative and that's the reason these diseases have come back."

Dr Wakefield's 1998 paper was not in fact about whether the MMR jab caused autism, but whether a group of healthy children who had been diagnosed with autism were suffering from bowel disease. He said he was asked to investigate the MMR link by some concerned parents.

"I was always taught at medical school to listen to the patient. It would have



FAMILY SACRIFICE: Dr Andrew Wakefield at home in Texas with his wife Carmel and children Imogen and Corin

been negligent of me to ignore the parents' concerns," he insisted.

"The MMR was introduced in 1988. Between 1996 and 2000 we had about 1,000 letters from doctors and parents all with the same kind of story – they'd taken their children for the jabs and the children had suffered

some kind of event that left them with autism and gut problems.

"We examined the children and discovered they had a new kind of bowel disease. When we treated the bowel disease, their behaviour improved."

On the basis of his concerns, Dr Wakefield and his team were given

ethical clearance for a small study of a dozen children. The research team discussed at length whether to exclude the fact that the parents of eight of the children felt that MMR was to blame, and decided not to. They added the following line to *The Lancet* paper: "We did not prove an

association between the MMR vaccine and the syndrome described."

At a Press conference to launch the paper in 1998, Dr Wakefield was asked about MMR and recommended that single vaccines be used until further investigations were carried out. The public scare about autism and vaccination took root within days.

But wouldn't it have been simpler to omit any reference to MMR?

"You can't censor parts of a story you find uncomfortable," he said. "You can't corrupt the science. And my opinion has been reinforced since then. It may be uncomfortable for David Salisbury [the Government's Director of Immunisation], the Department of Health and the pharmaceutical industry, but that's not

'Doctors are scared to rock the boat'

my issue. My issue was to establish whether these parental suspicions reflected a real problem.

"Between 1998 and 2001, we investigated about 160 autistic children for bowel disease, and MMR was mentioned frequently."

Dr Wakefield's career was threatened in 2001 when a new Professor of Medicine, Mark Pepys, took over at the Royal Free. "One of the first things he did was call me in and tell me, "You no longer form any part of my plans for the future of this department,"" said Dr Wakefield.

His subsequent resignation put paid to his dreams of a professorship in charge of a new centre for research into autism and bowel disease. His funding applications were ignored and one pharmaceutical company excluded him from speaking at a conference it sponsored.

"They cut me off at the knees and

hoped that I would bleed to death," he said. "I couldn't work in my field in the UK any longer, but doors were opening in the States. I was invited to deliver a series of lectures in Florida and met more doctors and scientists who were as concerned as I was about the MMR vaccine."

"The worst of all this was having to spend three years apart from my family. It was a very lonely life. I missed the family dreadfully and the hostile media intrusion has been very tough on my children [Corin, now 12, Imogen, 15, Sam, 19, and James, 21] and that makes me angry. We eventually decided the family would move to Austin."

His wife Carmel, also a doctor, recalled: "We had begun to live separate lives. By 2004, I was raising the kids on my own and it would have been very easy for us just to drift apart. Andy missed birthdays and anniversaries, school concerts and special events. We knew his work was important so we got used to it."

He has gone on to open Thoughtful House in Austin, a research and treatment centre for children with developmental disorders.

Dr Wakefield and a few like-minded scientists are lonely voices against the vast majority view of the scientific world, which sees no proof of any link between MMR and autism. He insists, however, that further research will vindicate his beliefs. Three American studies are underway and there is also growing recognition of a link between autism and bowel disease.

"I have learned what it's like to be sidelined and ridiculed and I don't think anyone should have to go through that," he said.

"What has happened to me has taught other scientists that it's safer never to rock the boat. Doctors are scared to speak for fear that what happened to me may happen to them. And that can't be good for science."