

# Vaccine Damage Denial and the British Press

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## Abstract

This article was written for *The Autism File* in 2009 and represents a summary version of one of the chapters in my e-book *Brave New World of Zero Risk*. During the time of the character assassination of Dr. Andrew Wakefield in Britain, many campaigners repeated the mantra, 'It isn't censorship, it's just that many journalists see this story as being played out.' The idea that the press is somehow free from pharmaceutical, government, or other corporate intervention is a very naive and, in writing this article, I wanted to correct this view. Anyone who wants to put this short article in a wider context might like to read *Flat Earth News* by Nick Davies, published by Vintage in 2009.

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This hysteria was putting a good family in danger. If left unchecked the groundless chatter about murder could grow like a weed, spreading through the community, unsettling people, making them question one of the fundamental pillars of the new society (Soviet Union 1953): there is no crime.  
Tom Rob Smith. *Child 44*. Pocket Books UK, Simon & Schuster, 2008

Since the rising count of autism began in the late 1980s, newspaper coverage of autism has principally related to 'an interesting' but esoteric illness, posing inevitable questions about perspective and interpretation. While the story of an autistic child, portrayed as an unhappy genetic accident, might pull on reader's heartstrings, a story that specifically blames vaccine manufacturers for an uncontrollable child with regressive autism is a different matter.

Over the last twenty years few press articles in Britain have attempted to join up the dots between mercury, measles virus, nutrition or, for that matter, any other environmental challenges, and autism spectrum disorders (ASD). There seems to have been a natural reluctance amongst journalists and commentators to investigate rising rates of autism within any environmental context.<sup>1</sup> The story of Dr. Andrew Wakefield, the serious white-coated research doctor who, since the mid-1990s, has been at the heart of the confrontation between the parents of vaccine damaged children, the vaccine industry and the government in Britain, has had an intermittent airing. While the story of the maverick Dr. Wakefield challenging the establishment with cheated science has had a more regular audience. Nothing apparently, however, completely explains the descent of the vaccine-autism story into the present media silence that it now inhabits. This article explores that silence.

In 1988, three brands of MMR vaccine were launched in England. In 1992 two of these brands, the two which contained the Urabe mumps viral strain, were withdrawn following reports of severe adverse reactions, especially meningitis, in Britain, Canada, and Japan. There was next-to-no media coverage of the government's withdrawal of these two MMR vaccines

nor of the large number of British children adversely affected by these two brands. The government played it very low-key—intimating that British researchers, and therefore Government labs, had grasped this nettle very quickly and saved large numbers of children from 'mild' adverse reactions.<sup>2</sup>

The truth, however, was quite different. First, Britain did not stop prescribing Urabe containing vaccines until two years after the government heard of problems from Queen's Medical Centre research in Nottingham. Second, the adverse effects were severe, with the government's own figures suggesting that 20,000 babies and children had suffered adverse reactions.<sup>3,4</sup> Third, none of the parents of these children, who were adversely affected by being inoculated with either of the two Urabe-mumps-strain vaccines have been compensated by the British government. In fact, a clear sign that the government and the pharmaceutical companies had seized the moral low-ground was that, as soon as the Urabe-strain-mumps vaccine made by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) was taken off the market in Britain, GSK began selling it to Argentina, Chile, Haiti, Honduras and Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

The first article in the press that linked the Urabe strain mumps vaccine with meningitis appeared in the *Daily Mail* in 1992. It concerned Rachael Coote, a young girl damaged by MMR vaccination and her mother Ann. Ann explained how the vaccination had affected Rachel:

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Laurance, Research team's work led to withdrawal of children's vaccines. *The Times* September 16 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Johnston, Jab risk was ignored. *Sunday Express* April 1, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that British members of the JCVI had this vital information about serious adverse reactions to Urabe strain vaccines, was not made public in the press until 2001, see Lucy Johnston, Jab risk was ignored, *Sunday Express*, 1 April 2001, then the story flared up again in 2007. See Mark Watts and Christopher Hope, Vaccine officials knew about MMR risks, *Daily Telegraph*, March 5 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Johnston, Jab risk was ignored. *Sunday Express* April 1, 2001.

<sup>1</sup> Even when books have been published that refer to this subject, their authors are often irrationally attacked by the science lobbyists. This happened to the respected academic Richard Lathe when he published *Autism, Brain and Environment* (2006) and the psychologist, Lisa Blakemore-Brown when she published *Reweaving the Autistic Tapestry* (2002).

Hours after the vaccination her face began to swell, her temperature soared to 106 degrees and blood vessels in her eyes began to burst. Eventually when Rachel was suffering severe convulsions, she was admitted to hospital where doctors managed to reduce her temperature. But soon afterwards she began having regular fits and convulsions which were confirmed as epilepsy.<sup>6</sup>

From 1992 until 1998, there was consistent coverage of both parents and children who claimed to have been affected by the one remaining MMR II vaccination, this coverage, which ran parallel with parents attending the Royal Free Hospital<sup>7,8,9,10,11,12,13</sup> was accompanied by the depiction of Dr. Andrew Wakefield as a serious doctor who was challenging the government safety record on MMR and who had reporting a possible link between MMR, Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) and regressive autism in a small subgroup of children.

Even after the press briefing organised by University College London and the Royal free Hospital following the publication of Dr. Wakefield's *Lancet* paper in 1998,<sup>14</sup> there was still considerable sympathetic media interest in Dr. Wakefield, MMR, parents and the Royal Free Hospital. This interest built-up considerably through the years 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003. These years are littered with stories of considerable dramatic content from journalists and newspapers, that took up the ball of the *Lancet* paper and ran with it. Even *the Guardian*—later to become a major protagonist of Dr. Wakefield—ran to an almost full-page interview with Dr. Wakefield, accompanied by a serious discussion about the culture of dissent and the £3M campaign recently launched to promote MMR.<sup>15</sup>

In the year 2000 and 2001, a number of investigative reports, especially in the *Observer* uncovered some material from previous meetings of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization (JCVI). In the year 2000, the *Observer* continued to run stories about other vaccines and their history of adverse

reactions. In August 2000, the paper ran a story about the damage done by the government's meningitis vaccine.<sup>16</sup> Then, in July 2001, the paper published a story about the damage done to babies and children by batches of whooping cough vaccine dispensed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which, it turned out, were 14-times more potent than the British standard dose.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, throughout 2000 and 2001, a party political conflict surfaced over the Urabe-strain mumps vaccine. In the year 2000, when Mr. Ian Stewart MP for Eccles, Greater Manchester organised across party MPs to support vaccine-damaged children and their parents at a demonstration outside the commons, they accused Gordon Brown, the Deputy leader of the party, of hypocrisy. Having said, in opposition, that all damaged children should have compensation payments, he had done nothing.<sup>18</sup> But, by this time, the government was solidly fixed on an argument that there was no link between the prescription of the Urabe-strain MMR and the serious adverse effects they had previously admitted had occurred; 'The governments medical experts are now telling ministers that there is no causal link and that poses a problem for the government'.<sup>19</sup> Then, in 2001, Dr. Liam Fox, the shadow health secretary, ripped into Labour for endangering the lives of children by refusing to fund single doses of measles vaccine.<sup>20</sup>

At this time, journalists, parents and commentators in general proved to be highly sceptical of Dr. David Salisbury's constantly loud claims that MMR was completely safe. The year 2000 also saw the publication of research by Professor John O'Leary, the director of pathology at a Dublin hospital. O'Leary's research found 24 out of 25 children who developed regressive autism after vaccination had measles virus in the gut.<sup>21</sup>

The years 1999 to 2003 were vintage years for the case put forward by Dr. Wakefield. Suddenly, it looked as if the weight of campaigning and evidence had fallen heavily on the side of the parents. There was a plethora of shorter stories and a couple of longer ones which, had there been any justice in the world, would have won awards.<sup>22</sup> The image of dissident medics was enhanced in 2001 when the GMC blundered into the life of Dr. Peter Mansfield,<sup>23</sup> wanting to accuse him of prescribing mumps, measles and rubella vaccines singly. This case, that the GMC had to drop, and the case of Dr. Jane Donegan, whom a fitness-to-practice panel found to be not guilty of any of the

<sup>6</sup> Carol Midgley, Vaccination: The dilemma now facing every parent: parents demand the truth about measles jab and meningitis. *Daily Mail* September 16, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Yvonne Roberts. A Shot in the Dark. *The Sunday Times Magazine*. 17 December 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Jenny Hope and Nicki Pope, How Safe are the vaccines we inject into our children. *Daily Mail*. 24 June 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Williams. Parents: A shot in the dark - should you have your baby immunised? *the Guardian*. July 20 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Clare Dyer. Measles jab fight gets aid: Families test ground for multi-million compensation claim over death and illness of child vaccine 'victims'. *The Guardian*. 16 September 1994.

<sup>11</sup> David Fletcher. Parents ready to sue over child vaccines link claimed between jabs and illnesses. *The Daily Telegraph*. 29 December 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Leonard, Is this doctor a hero or a health risk? Andrew Wakefield's career in Britain is in ruins because of his opposition to the MMR vaccine. *The Daily Telegraph*. 13 June 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Anjana Ahuja. The boy lost in a foreign country body and mind. *The Times* 19 August 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Wakefield AJ, Murch SH, Anthony A, Linnell J, Casson DM, Malik M, Berelowitz M, Dhillon AP, Thomson MA, Harvey P, Valentine A, Davies SE, Walker-Smith JA. Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. Inflammatory Bowel Disease Study Group, University Department of Medicine, Royal Free Hospital and School of Medicine, London, UK. *The Lancet*. Feb 28. 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Boseley. Stop stifling debate, critics warn government. *The Guardian*. 24 January 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Bright and Miles Barter. Meningitis jab deaths, 'cover-up'. *Observer* August 27, 2000

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Barnett and Tracy McVeigh, Baby deaths may be linked to toxic vaccine. *Observer* July 8, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Jon Craig, Labour must pay victims of vaccines. *Sunday Express* June 4. 2000.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*. MP Stewart after speaking to Social Security Minister Hugh Bayley and then Heath Minister Yvette Cooper.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, at this time, the government had stopped the license and therefore the importation of single vaccines. See: Nicholas Watt, MMR vaccine policy risks children's lives, claim Tories. *the Guardian*. April 25, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Lorraine Fraser. Measles Jab: New Link to Brain Damage. *The Mail on Sunday*. 9 April; 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Sandall *ibid* Dec 14 2003 and Justine Picardie, One in 86 primary-school children in the UK has autism, compared with one in 2,200 in 1988. *Telegraph Magazine* 6 June 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Lorraine Fraser, Doctor Fights GMC on MMR vaccine. *Sunday Telegraph* 5 August 2001.

charges brought against her, cast a new light on the case of Dr. Wakefield and did much to discredit the GMC.

It was, however, also at this time, that the inability of either one newspaper alone or a few papers combined to seriously tackle an important social issue was laid bare. On the whole, individual journalists, with some exceptions,<sup>24</sup> so unlike their contemporary depictions in popular culture, continued to steer clear of personal involvement in campaigns, presenting ‘flash in the pan’ stories that lacked substance. Despite the fact that a couple of papers began what appeared to be serious campaigns on behalf of vaccine-damaged children, these fizzled out as they entered the choppy and well-contained waters of organised vaccine-damage denial.<sup>25</sup>

The government’s complicity in stifling the truth about vaccine damage was evident in 2002, when it flirted with the idea of refusing education to children who were unable to prove that they had been vaccinated. This idea was to be repeatedly brought up over the next five years.<sup>26</sup>

The autumn of the year 2003 represented the watershed of an organised offensive against Dr. Wakefield, and the vaccine-damaged children and their parents. The first shots involved the denial of legal aid to parents who had been locked in a claim for compensation for nearly ten years. After Brian Deer’s expose article in *The Sunday Times* in 2004, the orchestrated hiding of vaccine damage, became a continual factor in almost every piece about vaccination that appeared in the press. It wasn’t, however, going all one way. In December 2003, Channel 5 broadcast *Hear the Silence*, a television drama starring Juliet Stevenson as the parent of an autistic child and Hugh Bonneville as Dr. Wakefield.

The drama so frightened the medical and paediatric establishment that they issued a statement signed by a few of their number giving a medical TV critics view of the programme. The drama they said ‘distorts the truth in what can only be described as an irresponsible and reckless way’.<sup>27</sup> The pre-recorded debate that followed the programme, threw representatives of the science lobby groups together, with Andrew Wakefield and a couple of his supporters. The science lobby groupies, finding themselves in the majority, behaved like a cage full of ferrets finding a mouse in their midst.

What was generally not known, and therefore not taken into account, in looking at the press and the media generally, in the period between 1998 and 2003, was that, behind the scenes, science lobby groups backed by government and industry were

organising to censor arguments about vaccine damage and the research work of people such as Dr. Wakefield.

After 2004, if concerned editors or journalists broke rank, they could pay a high price. By the time Dennis Campbell wrote up an interview with Dr. Wakefield in the *Observer* just a week before the GMC hearing opened,<sup>28</sup> the science lobby groups had all their agents in place. The article contained compulsory quotes from pharmaceutical ‘sleepers’ - Vivienne Parry commented ‘*Wakefield is wrong but people think he is being hounded by the establishment*’.<sup>29</sup> Following the article, Campbell himself was rigorously chastised, carpeted almost every day for a week by the papers editor, who in turn was visited by a team from the Science Media Centre and put under ‘heavy manners’, and warned of the consequences of publishing anti-science views. Some weeks later, when the editor was sacked, his role in the Campbell story was widely cited as one of his homemade though lesser petards.

During the years 2007 and 2008, Dr. Wakefield, Professor Simon Murch and Professor Walker Smith have been on trial at a General Medical Council’s fitness-to-practice hearing. With three exceptions,<sup>30</sup> none of the media have professed any interest in the hearing. In fact, from the moment that Brian Deer’s expose in *The Sunday Times* was turned into a complaint on the commands of the then Secretary of State for Health and passed to the GMC, the media has generally pretended that there has been no opposition to the prosecution. Despite the fact that these doctors are accused of heinous medical crimes in modern medical history, no British newspaper or television news programme has considered the ‘trial’ worthy of coverage.

In the case of the damage caused by the combined MMR vaccination to thousand’s of British children, the government and the NHS have been in the forefront of the denial, hand-in-glove with the multinational corporations and the media to ensure that the facts of MMR vaccine damage do not reach the public. The day before the publication of Brian Deer’s *Sunday Times* ‘expose’ of Dr. Wakefield, then Secretary of State for Health John Reid instructed that the case of Dr. Wakefield should be reported urgently to the General Medical Council (GMC).<sup>31</sup> Then, only days after publications of the article, the Prime Minister, himself, made a statement lending authority to it.<sup>32</sup>

Such obvious government support for the pharmaceutical companies, and such high ranking political intervention to cover a serious public-health crisis, however, only provided the more visible clues to what had been a well organised approach to public-health problems by government and the pharmaceutical companies, that had been coming together in the shad-

<sup>24</sup> Melanie Phillips stands out in this respect. Writing in March 2003, she began a well researched series titled MMR: The Truth and she stood up against the personal attacks on her from people like Ben Goldacre in *the Guardian*, demanding a right of reply in that paper. However, when the government and science lobby defence began in earnest in 2004, even Melanie Phillips seemed to find it increasingly difficult to publish her point of view.

<sup>25</sup> The campaign launched by the *Daily Express* in May 2,000 began with Rachel Ellis and Lucy Johnston, with an unusual front-page headline, a quote from Jack Ashley who had previously campaigned on behalf of children damaged by DPT. ‘They are the victims of a war fought against disease on behalf of us all. They must be compensated for their sacrifice’ *Daily Express* May 16. 2000. And continued with hard hitting front page articles by Rachel Ellis and Anthony Bevins.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Kirby, MMR jab rebels face school ban; shock move to stop disease spreading. *News of the World*, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Nicole Martin, TV Drama on MMR ‘could cost lives’ *Daily Telegraph*. December 13, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Denis Campbell, I will not back down, vows doctor at heart of autism row. *The Observer*, Special Report. July 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Vivienne Parry a pop-science television entertainer who has found a place on the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and is also involved with the Science Media Centre.

<sup>30</sup> Cassandra Jardine with Sally Beck, MMR: The debate that won’t go away *The Daily Telegraph* May 6, 2008. Lucy Johnston, Hollywood takes on the MMR jab, *Daily Express*, 18 Oct 2008. Sally Beck, I got my son back, *Daily Express* May 7, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Reid said: ‘This alleged conflict of interest is a matter for the GMC. I am sure they will want to look into this as a matter of urgency.’

<sup>32</sup> On the 23rd February 2004, Tony Blair said on ITV; ‘I hope now that people see the situation is different from what they were led to believe’.

ows for almost two decades.

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In the late 1980s, at the same time that the Wellcome Foundation began marketing its AIDS drug AZT and, coincidentally, at the time they were distributing the surviving MMR II in Britain for Merck, the Wellcome Foundation and its Trust, created one of the first British medicine and healthcare lobby groups: The Campaign Against Health Fraud (CAHF), which was modelled on the US *American Council Against Health Fraud*, and later changed its name to HealthWatch.<sup>33</sup>

HealthWatch had three objectives. The first was to campaign on behalf of pharmaceutical and processed food companies, this was often expressed as campaigning *for* double blind placebo trials and *evidence-based* medicine, and *against* vitamins and food supplements and any idea that food could be used as medicine.<sup>34</sup> The second was to campaign *against* alternative therapies, especially those that competed with drugs. The third, less obvious, objective was to campaign *against* the increasingly scientifically accepted theory that chemicals and ambient environmental toxins could have adverse health effects.

HealthWatch, campaigned *against* those who suggested that multiple chemical sensitivity existed, *against* the idea that foods could create allergic reactions, *against* people who suggested that they had been injured by organophosphate pesticides and insistently *for* the idea that ME and chronic fatigue syndrome were illusory illnesses. They campaigned *against* soldiers who claimed that they had Gulf War Syndrome in the 1980s. And, when the 1988 Camelford water-pollution incident occurred in Cornwall killing hundreds of people and leaving others seriously ill, one of their leading lights claimed that the people of Lower Moore could have suffered from mass hysteria.<sup>35</sup>

Healthwatch was *against* any personal accounts of health or health treatments. Well ... that's not quite true, they attacked personal accounts when they involved alternative therapies. For example Michael Gearin-Tosh was castigated for his marvellous book **Living Proof: A medical mutiny** while John Diamond's empty anti-alternative-medicine book, **C: Because cowards get cancer too**, was greeted ecstatically.

The advent of CAHF=heralded a new concept of health risk denial engineered by multinational corporations. Behind the

obvious healthcare-related issues, however, lay a more sinister strategy: to ensure that industrial science maintained the upper hand in developed societies. HealthWatch was insistent that the media was to blame for amplifying and broadcasting the unscientific fears of those who said they suffered environmental illness. In order to campaign against a lack of science in newspapers and television programmes, HealthWatch linked-up with the Ciba Geigy (now Novartis) funded Media Resources Centre (MRC). The idea of the MRC was to put journalists in touch with dependable industrial scientists who could brief them for their articles and programmes.

On the whole HealthWatch failed in the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> One of its fundamental weaknesses was its continual denial of drug company funding, that left the organisation vulnerable to accusations. After 1995, HealthWatch faded dramatically. In the first years of the 21st century, however, the organisation was revitalised by members of Sense about Science (SAS) and the Science Media Centre (SMC). These new transatlantic multinationally funded industry lobbying groups brought greater support to the initial programme of CAHF: that there could be no such thing as chemical damage to human health. At the same time, they mounted a massive second wave of campaigning against alternative medicine. But, most alarmingly, they went 'back to basics' on the issue of how to tame the media and stop it referring to either toxic threats to health or alternative diagnosis or treatments.

The decade of the 1990s was full of incidents that forewarned the science-based multinational industries that they had to defend their competitiveness. One of the first incidents under the aegis of New Labour was the case of Dr. Arpad Pusztai.<sup>37</sup> In 1997, Pusztai, a little known but experienced geneticist at the Rowatt Institute doing research funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the funders of which also included Unilever, GlaxoSmithKline, DuPont and Astra Zeneca, found that mice fed genetically modified potato developed health damage.

As soon as Pusztai publicised his research results his career came to an end. He was accused of breaking the rules of the BBSRC funding by talking to the media. It was said he was a second-rate research scientist, his grants were withdrawn, and he lost his position at the Rowett Institute.

The campaign against GM crops and Monsanto's attempt to introduce them to Britain without parliamentary debate was spectacular. Suddenly, industry found itself forced onto the back foot. The situation of conflict between post-industrial technology in Britain was amplified in the US, where many states introduced 'food disparagement' laws in the nineteen nineties to silence critics of pesticides such as Alar.

At the end of the twentieth century, industrial scientists, in Britain and the US felt that they were coming disproportionately under fire in the media in a way that might seriously jeopardise their profits. In Britain, industrial scientists and Liberal

<sup>33</sup> See this author, **Dirty Medicine**. Slingshot Publications, London 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Something that seems to have passed almost everyone by in the GMC campaign against Dr. Wakefield, Professor Simon Murch and Professor Walker Smith, is the fact especially Murch and Walker-Smith, were leading (alternative) nutritional experts. The word alternative has to be inserted there, because they and Dr. Wakefield's work and theories did to some extent involve the investigation of damage done to the gastrointestinal tract by commercial food products, in celiac's disease, Chrono's disease, allergies, lactose intolerance and IBD. Specialists in these areas have been the traditional targets of quackbusters and health fraud activists. See **Dirty Medicine** by this author.

<sup>35</sup> David A., Wessely S., The legend of Camelford: medical consequences of a water pollution accident. *J Psychosom Res* 1995;39: 1-10. See **Skewed** by this author also Bernard Dixon, Still Waters. *BMJ*,311:395 (5 August) 1995. Dixon a deeply committed CSICOP and CAHF member begins the review saying, 'we are left today with a mixture of incomplete and contradictory memories: the aluminium sulphate made lots of people seriously ill; but mass hysteria was largely responsible for the furor'. and he ends the review saying, 'There were, of course, major differences between the two incidents (the second being the grounding of the Braer oil tanker in 1993) --not least in the irresponsible reporting that did so much to inflame passions in Camelford.

<sup>36</sup> See this author, **Dirty Medicine: Science, big business and the assault on natural health care**. Slingshot Publications. London 1993. www.slingshotpublications.com.

<sup>37</sup> For a full version of what happened to Dr. Arpad Pusztai, see the excellent GM Watch website (<http://www.gmwatch.eu>). This is a temporary site after constant attacks by the biotech industry brought down their considerable site earlier this year. If you have trouble, Google GM Watch or Dr. Arpad Pusztai

peers decided to do something about it; they chose the battle over GM crops to organise themselves.

### Old Liberals and New Labour

In 1997, after nearly 20 years of Conservative government in Britain, New Labour won a landslide election victory. During his years as party leader, Tony Blair had transformed the Labour Party, drawing into it, at its highest level, prosperous Liberals and Social Democrats. Those individuals who funded New Labour's election campaign were rewarded with peerages and thus given the opportunity to pursue their interests in the House of Lords and the new government.

Within a year of coming to power, this alliance between Labour and New Liberals was engulfed in a financial scandal involving cash payments to access the government and the selling off of much of the industrial infrastructure. This moment was popularly termed Lobbygate.<sup>38</sup>

Two of the most influential peers at the forefront of the new governmental alliance were Lord David Sainsbury and Lord Dick Taverne. Both were heavily committed to multinational business. While Sainsbury controlled a number of GM companies, Taverne had spent the last ten years, while working politically with Sainsbury, organising a powerful PR company that represented multinational companies in Europe, including GlaxoSmithKline.

Having given New Labour, £3M in 1996 and 1997 - a sum that would grow to £7M by 2001 - in 1998, David Sainsbury was gifted the role as head of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) with his own Office of Science and Technology (OST) and overall control of all the Research Councils. Outside of parliament but intimately connected to it, after 1997, Lord Taverne began building support for a concerted campaign, against alternative medicine and in support of the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>39</sup>

The only real surprise in the two Lords' lobby building for science was those with whom they partnered. They joined up with the ex-Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) rump which, by 1998, was calling itself Living Marxism (or LM). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s RCP had presented itself as group in favour of Trotskyist revolution against capitalism and completely in support of nationalist military struggles against imperialism. Strange as these bedfellows appear, with the help of Taverne and Sainsbury, ex-revolutionary communists were shoehorned into a series of influential science-based organisations, the most important being Sense About Science and the Science Media Centre.

<sup>38</sup> Greg Palast, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, Robinson. London. 2003

<sup>39</sup> Taverne's last book, *The March of Unreason: Science, Democracy, and the New Fundamentalism* was published in 2005 to rave reviews from his industrial friends and lobby groupies but almost complete silence from anyone who could read. One of the best reviews was from Margaret Cook in the *Guardian* of April 2 2005. In a superb piece of writing, Cook begins the review by pointing out a few of Taverne's absurdities and spends the rest of the review, gathering pace, pointing to more and more of the book's absurdities. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/apr/02/scienceandnature.highereducation>

### A Programme on Press Censorship

In May 1999 a House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology recommended in its report, *Scientific Advisory System: Genetically Modified Foods*:

Media coverage of scientific matters should be governed by a Code of Practice, which stipulates that scientific stories should be factually accurate. Breaches of the Code should be referred to the Press Complaints Commission.

A little known organisation called the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) was unaccountably appointed to develop such a code. The SIRC were partnered by the part corporately funded Royal Society and the part corporately funded Royal Institution of Great Britain.<sup>40,41</sup>

*The more recent scare over the MMR vaccine has resulted in a drop in immunisation rates, to a level possibly below that needed to prevent a measles epidemic. In such cases, the 'source' must bear much of the responsibility, but more cautious media reporting could have significantly limited the damage.*

**Guidelines on science and health communication**  
*Ri, SIRC, RS.*

The SIRC claims to be an independent, non-profit organisation, founded to conduct research on lifestyle issues. However, it is funded mainly from the profits of a sister organisation. MCM Research, which is a problem solving, *risk management* research, positive communication and PR organisation, that works almost entirely for the food-and-drinks industry. Its clients include the Ministry of Defence and the Sugar Bureau.

The process of creating the rules began in March 2000, when the Royal Society, within which Lord Sainsbury had set up a rebuttal unit to defend industrial science against critics,<sup>42</sup> published its **Scientists and the Media: Guidelines for scientists working with the media and comments on a press code of practice**.<sup>43</sup> The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, a favourite haunt of Taverne, subsequently endorsed this document in its report *Science and Society*.<sup>44</sup> In order to produce the **Guidelines**, and to bring together the Royal Society and the Royal Institution with the SIRC, the SIRC formed the Joint Forum of the Social Issues Research

<sup>40</sup> Lord Sainsbury, having left the government just before Blair's resignation as prime minister, is now Chairman of the Royal Society's 350-year anniversary campaign fund, which aims to raise £100 million by 2010.

<sup>41</sup> The Royal Society; about a fifth of its funding is declared as coming from corporations, including AstraZeneca and Pfizer Limited. The Royal Institution's building recently reopened following a £20-million refurbishment. The building contains the Science Media Centre, which is funded by most of the world's pharmaceutical companies, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* and a large number of other corporations.

<sup>42</sup> Laurie Flynn and Michael Sean Gillard, Pro-GM food scientist 'threatened editor', *The Guardian* November 1, 1999. can be accessed at: <http://users.skynet.be/nwp/genmani003.htm>

<sup>43</sup> **Scientists and the Media: Guidelines for scientists working with the media and comments on a press code of practice**. Royal Society. 2000

<sup>44</sup> The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology. *Science and Society*, 2000.

Centre, combining people from Sense About Science (SAS) and SIRC.

The joint forum included Dr. Michael Fitzpatrick, with his 20-year history of Revolutionary Communism, and Lord Taverne QC, previously top PR man for GlaxoSmithKline. Other members of the Joint Forum included people influential in academia and media, such as: Peter Bell, former controller of policy, BBC News; Philip Harding, controller of editorial policy, BBC; Steve Connor, science editor, *The Independent*; Dr. Graham Easton, GP and ‘senior broadcast journalist’, BBC Science Radio; and Professor Susan Greenfield, director, The Royal Institution.

## The Guidelines

Reading the **Guidelines on science and health communication**, it becomes clear that their title should read: **Guidelines to enforce a corporate scientific construct on all communications about health**.

**Balance:** Newspapers may suppose that they have produced ‘balanced’ reports by quoting opposing views from scientists about a particular issue. While the intention may be to present both sides of an argument, a majority view on that matter may be held within the scientific community, and the opposing view is held by only a quixotic minority of individuals.

Scientists and the media: Guidelines for scientists working with the media and comments on a press code of practice.  
The Royal Society 2000

There can be no doubt about the goals of the **Guidelines**. They were crafted to serve as a defensive weapon in any future conflicts between corporate science and dissenters. The **Guidelines** attempt to cut off the oxygen of public information about dissidents, like Pusztai and Wakefield, and those who might be swayed by their arguments.

Only slightly beneath the surface of the **Guidelines** lurks a heady defence of vested corporate interests. The problem seems to be that those involved in propagating corporate science cannot conceive of a democratic process involving political, moral or social opposition to their ideas. These particular industrial scientists don’t want democratic public discourse about their work.

*Although the majority view may occasionally prove to be incorrect at a later date, such instances are exceptions rather than the rule. While we appreciate that it may be difficult for journalists to take a poll of scientific views, it is in the public interest that journalists identify, whenever possible, a majority view.*

Scientists and the media. *The Royal Society, 2000*

The guidelines grew through the Royal Society and the Royal Institution, and finally through the SIRC and were placed in the hands of the Science and Media Centre, for promotion. Those behind the guidelines wanted to outlaw political, personal and alternative views on health and restrict the writing, *even fictional writing*, entirely to scientific observations. They wanted to outlaw the stories of curers, herbalists and homeo-

paths, not to mention such people as parents of vaccine damaged children and dramatists.<sup>45</sup>

The Royal Society supports this proposal so does Smith-Kline Beecham.

*The House of Lords Report, Science and media.  
Chapter 7*

Everything was done to the **Guidelines** to give them an almost statutory authority. In fact, they had been put in published shape by a small group of individuals who, despite being associated with celebrated organisations, now usually worked in partnership with multinational corporations.

The **Guidelines on Science and Health Communication** look forward to a time when all health matters will be viewed only through a scientific lens. Permission for any study from an ethics committee, double-blind placebo controlled trials, correct procedures for peer review, publication in a mainstream journal, and finally reports in the media, in lay language, controlled by regulatory observers ... **1984 and after?**

The **Guidelines** are, in effect, an attempt by science to impose a scientific construct on all health information. The **Guidelines** are backed by the very corporations that are protected by them, the very pharmaceutical companies that consistently disguise, bury or fail to make public their research results. Consequently, they jeopardise the very soul of scientific enquiry.

Information that is misleading or factually inaccurate can cause real distress to vulnerable groups. Misleading information that provokes unfounded public reactions (e.g., reluctance to undergo vaccination) can be said to cost lives.

**Guidelines on science and health communication**

The introduction to the **Guidelines** exhorts, ‘both journalists and scientists concerned with the *general reporting of research results should explicitly consider the likely public reaction and should make appropriate decisions about the manner in which reports are made*’. Long live newsspeak! And let’s not forget the effects of research results on corporate profit?

## Conclusions

The contemporary deep silence on vaccine damage, and the role of the press appears to be a complete reversal of the position forty years ago when, for example, *The Sunday Times* and its journalists campaigned over a seven year period, under the leadership of the paper’s editor, to bring to light the cases of mothers and their children affected by Thalidomide.<sup>46</sup>

No doubt the government has felt that fall-out from the rising levels of autism had to be seen as a political long game - the kind that is still there, untouched, when your party leaves office. And, like civil servants all over the world, the government

<sup>45</sup> In 2006, the BBC banned worldwide an already broadcast episode of its very successful Judge John Deed drama series, written and produced by one Britain’s most notable television dramatists, Gordon Newman. The episode dramatised one aspect of the legal conflict over the MMR vaccination.

<sup>46</sup> *The Sunday Times* Insight Team, *Suffer The Children: The Story of Thalidomide*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1979,

treats it as a hidden crisis that can be left in abeyance. While the stark and highly confrontational matters of: dissident doctors, MMR uptake, MMR safety, IBD, and regressive and environmentally triggered autism must, on the other hand, be dealt with immediately.

The advent of vaccine damage denial, a political solution to a public-health problem, heralds a specific point in the development of post-industrial democracy: the point at which governments begin to act like private corporations defending their products, profits and competitiveness with a complete disregard for the health of the public.

The media in Britain has now almost completely shut down on the Dr. Wakefield-related MMR story. Although journalists themselves and people 'in the know' tend to offer blasé explanations for the lack of media investigation, such as 'the story is written-out', it would be quite irrational to imagine that the massively funded science lobby groups are not burrowing away in the background, achieving their objectives.

However, despite all the talk by lobby groups about the accurate reporting of science, the power of the pharmaceutical

corporations is still a political fact that has nothing at all to do with scientific method. The most effective piece of reporting in the destruction of Dr. Andrew Wakefield and his work, an expose, was written in *The Sunday Times* by Brian Deer, an apparently pro-MMR journalist with no scientific qualifications.

While dissident research workers, like Dr. Wakefield and Dr. Arpad Pusztai, have stuck slavishly to scientific method, arguing their case in peer-reviewed scientific journals and getting their research replicated in independent laboratories, industrial science and their lobby groups lie, cheat and exploit the popular media to win their case – doing anything but arguing the science.

By far the most important factor apart from the corporatism that has developed in Britain over the last 20 years is the partnering that has occurred between a previously *free* press and an increasingly authoritarian government-leaning industrial science sector. The **Guidelines on Science and Health Communication** is the document that underpins this corporatism and its resultant censorship.