

Medical Misinformation

“I swear by Apollo the Healer, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture.”

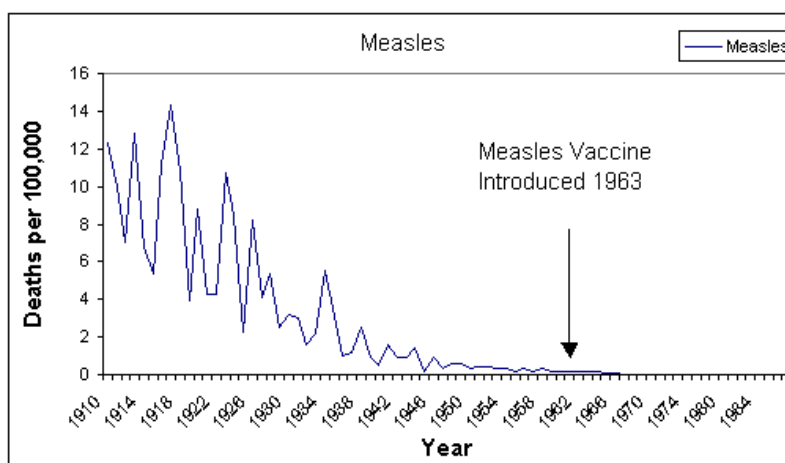
In its classic form the oath runs to several paragraphs but essentially, it means “above all, do no harm”.

Contrary to popular assumptions, not every doctor has sworn a pledge to the Oath attributed to Hippocrates written nearly 2500 years ago. Many medical schools include a version of the pledge as part of a graduation ceremony and for some it an essential rite of passage. That said, nearly all doctors would wish to uphold the high standards expected of them for the treatment of patients. Its relevance to modern medical practice has been reviewed from time to time and modified versions of the original have appeared. The difficult matters of abortion and medically assisted suicide introduce additional questions about the moral position of a physician.

Sadly, over the course of time, plenty of mistakes, ignorant decisions, and brutal choices were made, which on occasion, have caused more harm than good. Societal behaviour introduces new problems such as the spread of tobacco, stimulant and narcotic drugs, consumption of foods that lead to obesity and diabetes. The medical profession itself has created false premises that are now being amplified in the “echo chambers” of social media via the internet.

The vaccine-autism myth is one chilling example of fraudulent science. It is now some 25 years since an infamous article published in a prestigious medical journal, falsely linked the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine to autism.

Stunningly, the vaccine-autism myth still persists. It was amplified by the British media during its early years, later by celebrity endorsement and more recently by worldwide social media. Wakefield has continued his own relentless personal campaigning, moving well beyond the initial MMR vaccine scaremongering in his controversial film “Vaxxed”. The film was pulled before screening at the Tribeca Film Festival but found its way into independent theatres in the U.S. and Europe.



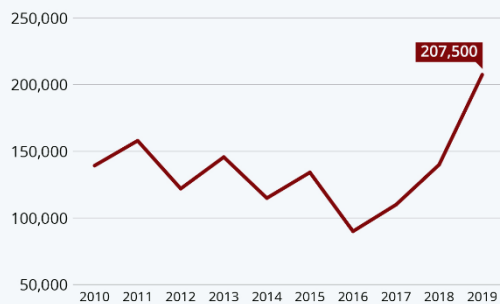
As a trainee doctor in the latter part of the 1970's I saw what I imagined might be the last cases of measles in children. The vaccine had been so successful it had become a rarity. The consequence of measles can be a form of meningitis leading to seizures, blindness, pneumonia and sometime death. The chart shows the almost complete

obliteration of the disease by the 1980's.

The next chart shows what has happened since the misinformation about the vaccine became widespread.

Measles: Deadly Disease Makes a Comeback

Estimated global deaths due to measles 2010-2019



Source: WHO



statista

In 2019, the WHO estimated that more than 207,000 people died of measles worldwide, the highest number in 23 years. The figure is also 50 percent higher than its 2016 counterpart - showing just how quickly the growth of measles deaths accelerated.

On 19 January 2024 a national incident was announced in England because of a rapidly growing outbreak of measles centred on the West Midlands

Wakefield's vaccine-autism scare continues to spark vaccine refusals and in the United States there has been a resurgence of measles, with more than 2,216 reported cases since 2000.

Wakefield was not disciplined by the UK medical authorities, nor was the article retracted by The Lancet until 2010. Despite numerous studies in Europe and the US to disprove the association, today, approximately one in three Americans believes that childhood vaccines can cause children to develop autism

Scepticism has spilled over into other areas, as the vaccine-autism myth has also prompted an alarming number of millennials — the generation that came of age in the era of Wakefield's misinformation — particularly in the U.S. not to vaccinate their children for any preventable infectious disease. Vaccine hesitancy was a major challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our children are offered different vaccines by the NHS at different stages of their childhood to protect against the most serious diseases. The vaccines offered at 8, 12 and 16 weeks offer protection against 9 different infections. For the greater part of the last 80 years, the programme has been incredibly successful but falling vaccination rates will potentially see the re-emergence of old diseases with significant consequences. Recent diphtheria outbreaks around the world stress the importance of sustaining high levels of vaccination coverage. For unvaccinated individuals, especially children, without proper treatment diphtheria can be fatal in around 30% of cases.

Over a century ago, the American writer Mark Twain quipped, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." In a world in which fabricated science is plentiful and spreads rapidly, we must be vigilant if we are to avert epidemics that would have been prevented were it not for vaccine denial.

Dr Peter Smith

October 2024

Sources:

Lancet Digit Health 2024 Published Online October 7, 2024 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500\(24\)00197-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500(24)00197-3)

BMJ 2024; 384 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q259> (Published 06 February 2024)

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41541-024-00951-8>

<https://time.com/5175704/andrew-wakefield-vaccine-autism/>