

## Parents Rally In Support of Doctor Facing Misconduct Charge On MMR-Autism Link Wakefield's GMC hearing scheduled for next month

By Judith Duffy, Health Correspondent

<http://www.sundayherald.com/display.var.1477577.0.0.php?utag=27167>

Parents of autistic children are planning a demonstration in support of the doctor at the centre of the MMR controversy, when he is summoned for a disciplinary hearing next month.

The Sunday Herald has learned that Dr Andrew Wakefield - who first suggested a link between the triple jab for mumps, measles and rubella, and autism and bowel disease - is due to appear before the General Medical Council (GMC) on July 16.

His research, published in 1998, led to widespread public fears about the safety of the vaccine and triggered a decline in MMR immunisation levels across the UK. Prime minister Tony Blair was even drawn into the row after consistently refusing to reveal whether his son Leo, now seven, received the jab.

Wakefield, who is now working in America, has faced widespread criticisms over the claims, with subsequent studies failing to confirm the link. In late 2004, the GMC launched an inquiry into allegations of serious professional misconduct against him and two former colleagues.

But parents who believe their children's autism has been triggered by the vaccine are planning to show their support for the doctor outside next month's disciplinary hearing in London.

In addition, an online petition to demand the government and health organisations "stop investigating the doctors and start investigating the patients" has collected more than 4000 signatures.

Campaigner Bill Welsh, president of the Edinburgh-based Autism Treatment Trust, claimed Wakefield was the victim of a "medical establishment witch-hunt".

"Dr Wakefield listened to the parents about their children's disease, clinically investigated the children and reported what he found - where is the crime in that?" he said. "This trial undermines the possibility of any future independent scientific research that might challenge establishment policy."

The petition, started by campaigner Nigel Thomas - who has two brothers diagnosed with autism - states: "I have seen first-hand their decline, seen them screaming in pain and I have seen how all but a handful of doctors repeatedly refused to investigate their problems, brushing off the family's concerns and leaving us helpless, like thousands of other families around the world.

"The only doctors who were prepared to help are now on trial whilst the children are denied basic investigations."

A spokesman for the GMC told the Sunday Herald that there would be a hearing involving Wakefield "in the near future", but insisted he could not confirm the date. He added that the exact charges which were being brought against the doctor would only be revealed at the start of the hearing.

Health officials have consistently maintained that MMR is safe and latest figures show that confidence in the jab is returning. However, vaccination rates across Scotland are still around 3% below the 95% target.

A government spokeswoman said MMR was the safest, most effective way of protecting children.

"The uptake of the MMR vaccination remains at a higher level than in recent times, but we will continue to monitor the level of immunisation," she added.

But many parents still harbour doubts. A Sunday Herald investigation last year revealed that thousands of children in Scotland have received single jabs for measles, mumps and rubella in recent years, with parents paying hundreds of pounds at private clinics because they are not available on the NHS.

Louise Tollin, from East Kilbride, thinks MMR led to her child being diagnosed with autism in 2004. She said four-year-old Christopher showed no signs of problems until he received the vaccine, when he "began to regress before her eyes".

"Christopher was born normal, I am 100% sure about that," she said.

"He got the MMR at the beginning of June and by the end of the month he had stopped responding to his name."

She added: "I think the government knows exactly what is going on and it is all being swept under the carpet."