Royal Society vs. Lancet over Health Scares

By ACSH Staff — June 20, 2005

A group of leading scientists in England is making headlines for writing a scathing letter attacking one of England's leading medical journals, the Lancet, for promoting unfounded health scares.

Thirty scientists associated with the Royal Society, including two Nobel laureates, wrote that "the publication of badly conducted and poorly refereed scare stories has had devastating consequences for individual and public health, in the UK and abroad, and carried a high economic cost," according to an article in the London Times [1]. The Royal Society [2] describes itself as the independent scientific academy of the UK dedicated to promoting excellence in science.

Particularly troubled by now-discredited scares linking MMR vaccine and autism, as well as an attack on genetically modified foods, Prof. Mark Pepys of the Royal Free Hospital in London told the Times that the MMR scare "has ruined the vaccination programme for MMR and cost the British taxpayer millions to repair the damage." It is all too rare that scientists band together to speak out against unfounded health scares.

Like the general media, journals are under constant pressure to produce headlines that get mass public attention and increase sales. Health scares sell regardless of the strength of the evidence behind them. Journals, the reporters who echo them, and the public who consumes this information should all be reminded to evaluate health scares with skepticism, given that there is a bias in favor of publishing these attention-grabbing items. Such scares may be found in a respected journal, a daily tabloid, or on the Internet.

You can't even depend on respected scientific journals like the Lancet to present unbiased sound-science information. For more on the topic, read ACSH's new report, Good Stories, Bad Science: A Guide for Journalists to the Health Claims of "Consumer Activist" Groups [3]. It will give you some tools to make you a more savvy consumer of health news and less vulnerable to the scaremongers.

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Links
[1] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1658807,00.html