Whelan, Horton, and Conspiracists on Wakefield; FDA on Asthma; Mug Thugs

By ACSH Staff — February 19, 2010

ACSH in the Media

• ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan was pleased to see that the news magazine *The Week* selected her column in the *New York Post* about *The Lancet*’s retraction of the Wakefield study for their “best columns of the week” section. “*Post* editorial page editor Mark Cunningham deserves credit for agreeing to publish it, and for his fine editing job,” says Dr. Whelan.

• ACSH's Jeff Stier attended the CPAC conference in Washington, DC, where he was featured on several radio shows. “I did a number of radio shows talking about so-called ‘nanny state’ issues like soda taxes and efforts to ban certain food ingredients like trans fats,” says Stier. “I was broadcast on syndicated shows around the country. I also talked with a top, like-minded senator about our plans to work more closely together in the future.”

• An *L.A. Times* blog quoted yesterday's *Morning Dispatch* in their coverage of the alarming number of prescriptions for chronic conditions that go unfilled.

Dr. Horton Blames You, Everyone Else

In light of *The Lancet*’s recent retraction of Dr. Wakefield's 1998 study linking the MMR vaccine to autism, NPR interviewed Dr. Richard Horton, the journal's editor, in order to determine how such an egregious paper was allowed to be published in the first place. Dr. Horton muses, “This was a system failure. We failed, I think the media failed, I think government failed, I think the scientific community failed. And we all have to very critically examine what part we played in this.”

“The media, in my opinion, was not at fault,” says Dr. Whelan. “This is one of the most prestigious medical journals in the world. When *The Lancet* publishes something so provocative, how could the media not pick it up? He should have said that he regrets publishing this. He was wrong. He should have apologized, but he never did.”

“When the reporter asked how bad science made it into such a respected journal, he didn't answer the question at all,” says Dr. Ross. “It's obvious that he shouldn't have published the study because it's a terrible study. He tries to spread the blame among the government and media, but that's not the whole truth. Wakefield is mostly to blame, but Horton was complicit. I don't accuse him of getting on the stump and going around telling people that vaccines cause autism like Wakefield did right after it was published, but of publishing such a flawed study in the first place.”
Naturally, He's Looking Out for the Kids
The retraction of The Lancet study was not enough to mollify anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists, as evidenced by a rambling, vitriolic essay on Age of Autism [4], which calls itself the “daily web newspaper of the autism epidemic.”

The author directs most of his fury at ACSH Advisor Dr. Steven Novella of the Yale University School of Medicine but manages to smear ACSH Advisor and vaccine expert Dr. Paul Offit, as well as ACSH itself, with the standard references to our vast treasury of industry money that we only wish existed.

“ACSH does get involved with these vaccine debates, so it’s inevitable that these people will target us at some point,” says Dr. Whelan. “We are accused of being funded by money from vaccine manufacturers, which we are not, and also being in cahoots with Dr. Offit and Dr. Novella, which we are proud to say we are, towards the advancement of science-based policy and education.”

Asthmatics: Beware LABAs
FDA analyses [5] of clinical trials show that the use of drugs in the class of long-acting beta agonists (LABAs) to treat asthma is associated with an increased risk of severe worsening of asthma symptoms. While these medications were designed to improve a patient’s ability to breathe freely and reduce the symptoms of asthma by relaxing muscles in the lung’s airways, studies show that the use of LABAs by themselves causes more harm than benefit. The drugs deemed most dangerous are GSK’s Serevent and Novartis’s Foradil.

“It’s not clear to me why the FDA didn’t simply pull those two drugs off the market, since they should never be used by themselves as asthma control or as a rescue medication,” says Dr. Ross. “They should only be used in combination with an asthma controller medication such as inhaled corticosteroid. That’s what the new FDA warnings state. But any change in asthma medication needs to be discussed with the patient’s own doctor.”

For more information, see ACSH’s publication on asthma [6].

Getting to the Real Source of the Problem
The British government wants pubs to replace glass beer mugs with shatter-proof, plastic substitutes [7] in order to offset the $4.3 billion that the UK’s National Health Service spends to treat victims of the roughly 87,000 annual incidents related to drunk people smashing beer mugs on each other and other alcohol-related problems.

“I guess this is what you call preventive medicine in England,” says Dr. Whelan.

“I wonder what Professor vom Saal will say about this,” says Dr. Ross. “Surely those new plastic mugs have ‘toxic’ BPA in them.”

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