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Comparative Study > Vaccine. 1989 Jun;7(3):199-210. doi: 10.1016/0264-410x(89)90229-6.

Permanent brain damage and pertussis vaccination: is the end of the saga in sight?

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Abstract

The development and widespread uptake of a safe and efficacious aluminium adsorbed diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine (DTP) in the United States between 1933 and 1944 led to a gradual decline in whooping cough morbidity and instilled confidence in a vaccination programme which has been effectively maintained for over 40 years. This contrasts with the turbulent history of pertussis vaccination in the United Kingdom where doubts as to the efficacy of available vaccines delayed their active national promotion until 1957, after which various reports resulted in further doubts over efficacy and safety. In 1974, the mass media became involved in the safety issue when the National Hospital for Sick Children case series of neurological events, which had occurred after DTP vaccination

was made core material for a television documentary. The Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) responded by establishing two retrospective studies of case records of post vaccination adverse events and two prospective studies. One of the latter, the National Childhood Encephalopathy Study (NCES) was regarded as the definitive case control study. A claim for damages, Loveday v Renton and The Wellcome Foundation, heard in the High Court of Justice in London, from early October 1987 until late February 1988 dealt with the general issue of whether, on the balance of probabilities, pertussis vaccine could cause permanent brain damage. The cornerstone of the claim that pertussis vaccine can cause permanent brain damage has always been the apparent clustering of onset of neurological disorders within the first 24-48 h after vaccination. One of the main finds of the NCES, however, which was not divulged in any published report but emerged in the course of the hearing, was that permanent brain damage did not occur within 48 h of DTP vaccination in any child in England, Scotland and Wales from mid-1976 to mid-1979 when 2 million doses of vaccine were used. The NCES, in this respect, completely undermined the evidence provided by various published case series. After a 61 day hearing, High Court judgment was given to the effect that the judge was not satisfied on balance of probability that pertussis vaccine can cause permanent brain damage in young children. Were it not for the fact that The Wellcome Foundation intervened in the action and obtained a court order giving access to the NCES cases records, some crucial information collected by the NCES might not have been brought to light.(ABSTRACT TRUNCATED AT 400 WORDS)

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