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MMR doctor given legal aid thousands

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ANDREW WAKEFIELD, the former surgeon whose campaign linking the MMR vaccine with autism caused a collapse in immunisation rates, was paid more than £400,000 by lawyers trying to prove that the vaccine was unsafe.

The payments, unearthed by The Sunday Times, were part of £3.4m distributed from the legal aid fund to doctors and scientists who had been recruited to support a now failed lawsuit against vaccine manufacturers.

Critics this weekend voiced amazement at the sums, which they said created a clear conflict of interest and were the "financial engine" behind a worldwide alarm over the triple measles, mumps and rubella shot.

"These figures are astonishing," said Dr Evan Harris, Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon.

"This lawsuit was an industry, and an industry peddling what turned out to be a myth."

According to the figures, released under the Freedom of Information Act, Wakefield was paid £435,643 in fees, plus £3,910 expenses.

Wakefield's work for the lawyers began two years before he published his now notorious report in The Lancet medical journal in February 1998, proposing a link between the vaccine and autism.

This suggestion, followed by a campaign led by Wakefield, caused immunisation rates to slump from 92% to 78.9%, although they have since partly recovered. In March this year the first British child in 14 years died from measles.

Later The Lancet retracted Wakefield's claim and apologised after a Sunday Times investigation showed that his research had been backed with £55,000 from lawyers, and that the children in the study used as evidence against the vaccine were also claimants in the lawsuit.

At the time Wakefield denied any conflict of interest and said that the money went to his hospital, not to him personally. No disclosure was made, however, of the vastly greater sums that he was receiving directly from the lawyers.

The bulk of the amount in the new figures, released by the Legal

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Services Commission (LSC), covers an eight to 10-year period. All payments had to be approved by the courts.

Those who received money include numerous Wakefield associates, business partners and employees who had acted as experts in the case.

Five of his former colleagues at the Royal Free hospital, north London, under whose aegis The Lancet paper was written, received a total of £183,000 in fees, according to the LSC.

Wakefield now runs a business in Austin, Texas, two of whose employees are listed as receiving a total of £112,000 in fees, while a Florida physician, who appointed the former surgeon as his "director of research", was paid £21,600, the figures show.

All have appeared in media reports as apparently confirming Wakefield's claims.

It is understood that the payments — for writing reports, attending meetings and in some cases carrying out research — were made at hourly rates varying between £120 and £200, or £1,000 a day.

"There was a huge conflict of interest," said Dr John March, an animal vaccine specialist who was among those recruited. "It bothered me quite a lot because I thought, well, if I'm getting paid for doing this, then surely it's in my interest to keep it going as long as possible."

March, who the LSC allowed almost £90,000 to research an aspect of Wakefield's theories, broke ranks this weekend to denounce both the science of the attack and the amount that the case had cost in lawyers' and experts' fees.

"The ironic thing is they were always going on about how, you know, how we've hardly got any money compared with the other side, who are funded by large pharmaceutical companies. And I'm thinking, judging by the amounts of money you're paying out, the other side must be living like millionaires," he said.

Also among those named as being paid from the legal aid fund was a referee for one of Wakefield's papers, who was allowed £40,000. A private GP who runs a single vaccines clinic received £6,000, the LSC says.

Following The Sunday Times investigation, immunisation rates have risen and the General Medical Council launched an inquiry. This is due to culminate in a three-month hearing next summer, where Wakefield faces charges — which he denies — of dishonesty over his research.

The LSC is also unlikely to escape criticism. Three years ago the commission, which administers a £2 billion budget to give poor people access to justice, acknowledged that the attempt to make a case against MMR with taxpayers' money was "not effective or appropriate".

The total cost for the attack on the vaccine was £14,053,856, plus Vat.

Following media campaigning, lawyers eventually registered 1,600 claimants in the lawsuit. None received any money.

This weekend Earl Howe, a Conservative party health spokesman, called for a parliamentary inquiry. "It's astonishing," he said. "This is crying out for select committee scrutiny."

Wakefield said in a statement that he had worked on the lawsuit for nine years, charged at a recommended rate, and gave money to charity.

"This work involved nights, weekends and much of my holidays, such that I saw little of my family during this time," he said. "I believed and still believe in the just cause of the matter under investigation."

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More on MMR by **Brian Deer**

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