

## Advertising watchdog orders website to remove claims linking MMR vaccine with autism

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A website that offers parents information about childhood immunisation has been told to remove claims that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine could be causing autism in some children, as they were misleading.

The UK Advertising Standards Authority ruled that this and other claims on the BabyJabs website ([www.babyjabs.co.uk](http://www.babyjabs.co.uk)) breached the code of the advertising industry body the Committee of Advertising Practice, which was designed to ensure that advertising did not mislead or harm consumers. The claims must not appear again, it said.

BabyJabs offers a children's vaccination service providing a choice of single and small combination vaccines in addition to providing information to help parents "plan a personalised immunisation schedule" for their child.

The authority found that the website's claim that "the [MMR] vaccine could be causing autism in up to 10% of children in the UK" was misleading because of lack evidence to support this.

"The claim relied on a number of assumptions, based on . . . extrapolation from . . . studies which did not support a link between the MMR vaccine and autism," the authority said in its decision.<sup>1</sup>

The advertising regulator also found lack of evidence for other claims. These included the suggestion that "most experts now agree that the large rise [in autism] has been caused partly by increased diagnosis, but also by a real increase in the number of children with autism."

Including this statement in a section on whether the MMR vaccine could cause autism may have led some people to think that the increase in the number of children with autism might be in part related to the MMR vaccine, the authority said.

"Because we had not seen supporting evidence that this was the case, and understood that the position was also contradicted by

general medical opinion, we concluded that the claim was misleading," said the ruling.

A further claim—that the vaccine strain of measles virus has been found in the guts and brains of some autistic children, supporting parents' belief that the MMR vaccine has caused autism in their children—was also found to be misleading. The authority found that the overall evidence did not draw conclusions on a link between the MMR vaccine and autism.

Defending the claims, the London based BabyJabs company cited several studies, including drawing on the statistical power of a study published in 2002 that found no association between the MMR vaccine and autism but where the 95% confidence limits were "over the 1.10 or 10% level." It also cited information from a book, *The Truth about Vaccines*, written by BabyJabs' medical director, Richard Halvorsen.

In response to the ruling the website's page on the MMR vaccine now says, "The Advertising Standards Authority has ordered BabyJabs to remove information relating to the alleged link between the MMR vaccine and autism. Though the medical authorities strongly refute any link between the MMR vaccine and autism we note that an Italian court, based on independent medical advice, ruled in March 2012 that the MMR vaccine had caused autism in a 9 year old boy."<sup>2</sup>

When approached by the *BMJ*, a spokeswoman for BabyJabs said that the company was not available for comment. She said that the company had changed its website and was now in line with the authority's ruling.

- 1 ASA adjudication on BabyJabs Ltd. 8 August 2012. [www.asa.org.uk/ASA-action/Adjudications/2012/8/BabyJabs-Ltd/SHP\\_ADJ\\_176003.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/ASA-action/Adjudications/2012/8/BabyJabs-Ltd/SHP_ADJ_176003.aspx).
- 2 BabyJabs. MMR vaccine. [www.babyjabs.co.uk/mmr.htm](http://www.babyjabs.co.uk/mmr.htm).

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