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Covid-19: Vaccines journal retracts controversial paper after editorial board members quit

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A research paper that was promoted by anti-vaccination activists has been retracted by the journal *Vaccines* after several members of its editorial board resigned.

The peer reviewed article, “The Safety of Covid-19 Vaccinations—We Should Rethink the Policy,” misinterpreted data to conclude that “for three deaths prevented by vaccination we have to accept two inflicted by vaccination.”¹

Katie Ewer, an immunologist at the Jenner Institute at Oxford University, who resigned from *Vaccines’* editorial board after publication of the article, wrote on Twitter, “It is grossly negligent and I can’t believe it passed peer review.”

None of the article’s three authors has a background in vaccinology, virology, or epidemiology. They are Harald Walach, a clinical psychologist and health researcher at Poznan University of Medical Sciences in Poland, who studies homeopathy and complementary medicine; Rainer Klement, a medical physicist who studies ketogenic diets in cancer treatment at the Leopoldina Hospital in Schweinfurt, Germany; and Wouter Aukema, an independent data scientist in Hoenderloo, Netherlands.

Walach is also the author of a paper just published in *JAMA Pediatrics* questioning the safety of masks in children.²

Adverse events

Vaccines is an open access journal published by the Swiss publisher MDPI. When the article was published on 24 June a Twitter storm followed, with some 14 000 tweets in a few days. After a number of editorial board members resigned the journal published an expression of concern about the article on 28 June, followed by a full retraction on 2 July.³

By the time of the retraction the full text of the article had been viewed more than 380 000 times and had been shared widely by anti-vaccination activists on social media. Liz Wheeler, a conservative commentator, promoted the paper in a video on Facebook on 30 June, “The vaccine study you’re not allowed to see,” which was viewed more than 250 000 times.

After concerns were raised the article was evaluated by *Vaccines’* editor in chief with the support of several editorial board members, who concluded that it “contained several errors that fundamentally affect the interpretation of the findings.”

To draw their conclusions the authors used data from the Netherlands Pharmacovigilance Center (Lareb) to calculate the number of severe and fatal side effects in every 100 000 vaccinations. The retraction

statement said that data from Lareb were “presented as being causally related to adverse events by the authors. This is inaccurate.”

As with the UK’s Yellow Card reporting system, anyone can report suspicions of adverse events that may be associated with vaccination. A reported adverse event does not imply causality. The journal also highlighted several other inaccuracies, including that fatal cases were certified by medical specialists.

Vaccine confidence

Helen Petousis-Harris, a vaccinologist at the University of Auckland, who also resigned from the editorial board, said she was pleased that the journal had acted quickly to retract the article. She wrote in a blog, “The damage to vaccine confidence and trust that can occur through the distribution of pseudoscience in good quality academic journals cannot be underestimated.”⁴

Criticising the study, she said, “The methods are fundamentally flawed—garbage in, garbage out.” The study authors used data from a study of 1.2 million Israeli people, half of whom received the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, to estimate that 16 000 people needed to be vaccinated to prevent one death.

Petousis-Harris said that vaccine effectiveness is never calculated using the number needed to vaccinate, as this cannot account for the effect on transmission and the herd effect of vaccines. She also noted that there was no topic expert among the authors and no indication that the referees who reviewed the work had experience in vaccine safety.

On 19 July 2021 we amended this story, which incorrectly named all three authors of the retracted paper in *Vaccines* as coauthors of a paper published in *JAMA Pediatrics* questioning the safety of masks in children. This was incorrect, as only Harald Walach was also an author of the *JAMA Pediatrics* paper. We apologise for this error.

- 1 Walach H, Klement RJ, Aukema W. The safety of covid-19 vaccinations—we should rethink the policy. *Vaccines (Basel)* 2021;9:693. doi: 10.3390/vaccines9070693. PMID: 34202529
- 2 Walach H, Weikl R, Prentice J, et al. Experimental assessment of carbon dioxide content in inhaled air with or without face masks in healthy children: a randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Pediatr* 2021. doi: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2659. PMID: 34190984
- 3 Retraction: Walech et al. The safety of covid-19 vaccinations—we should rethink the policy. *Vaccines* 2021;9:729. doi: 10.3390/vaccines9070729
- 4 Petousis-Harris H. Fundamentally flawed study on covid-19 vaccine safety is rapidly retracted. *Sciblogs* 2021 Jul 3. <https://sciblogs.co.nz/diplomaticcommunity/2021/07/03/fundamentally-flawed-study-on-covid-19-vaccine-safety-is-rapidly-retracted/>

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