

Spanking a Dead Monkey: Blaxill swings and misses

By David N. Brown

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The implosion of Andrew Wakefield's career and the desperate efforts of groups like Age of Autism to reverse it has continued apace this week with the latest contribution by Mark Blaxill, "Joan Cranmer's Fateful Decision and the Suppression of Autism Science". Here, he takes another stab at presenting Andrew Wakefield's latest obviously flawed, probably fraudulent, suspiciously published and now-retracted paper as the Great White Hope to prove that vaccines cause autism. As someone who took the initiative last November to contact the editor of *Neurotoxicology* to demand the retraction of this paper, and call for *Neurotoxicology* to be boycotted out of existence if it ever saw print, I feel obliged to take yet another shot at this twitching carcass of a non-story.

I was most struck by the fact that, for the third time, AoA has used my work without credit and in a misleading manner, in the form of the following passage: "We have obtained evidence, however, that Cranmer has participated in two separate communications on her decisions regarding the primate paper. The first of these came last November, in the form of a response to a threatening letter she had received, at which time Cranmer gave a strong defense of *Neurotoxicology's* review procedures..."

Let's go over the facts, compared to AoA's spin. "We have obtained evidence"? My correspondence with Cranmer was made available to anyone who cared to look it up last November. "Threatening"? I told the editor, "unless you retract immediately, I feel it is the duty of all professionals to boycott your magazine and all others in the Elsevier line." This could be considered a threat, but certainly not of the variety that one might think of from AoA's tone, and appears to be assumed by a commenter: "I wonder what threats were made to Joan Cranmer by Elsevier? Is there any way to find out? I'd bet that it was much, much more than just the threat of losing her job." Note how AoA's failure to cite properly and accurately allows this reader to transmute my protest and call for a boycott not only into something more sinister, but also into "threats... by Elsevier". (So, *Elsevier would call for a boycott of themselves?*) Naturally, I posted a comment for the purpose of correction, and of course it has failed to appear. But, the joke is on them: When the "Hairy Biped" made the Feb. 12 post preening over the monkey study one day before it was publicly retracted, he quoted my email to Cranmer in full (see "Hairy Biped Attacks!"). Anyone who has read Handley's article should have no trouble piecing together that he and Blaxill refer to the same letter, and that said letter contains nothing that could be considered a threat of violence or harassment against Cranmer personally. Note to AoA: *It does you little good to censor me for correcting you when you already quoted me saying the same thing!*

An additional note to AoA: This is the second time they have characterized my work as "threatening", in a tone that readily suggests violence or harassment. For future reference, this is my idea of that sort of threat: "Bow before me, mortal, and you shall *only* die!" Or: "If you don't stop tapping that pencil, I'll break it in half and shove the jagged ends up your nose!" Or: "I will replace Jenny McCarthy's Botox with Rogaine and JB Handley's Viagra with Lupron!" Or: "I'll run over your house with the NASA Crawler!" (Okay, I may have actually said one of those.) See the difference?

I am sure that Blaxill's intended purpose is to divert attention from the possible role of criticism and protest by professional scientists to a conspiracy theory of intimidation by "Big Pharma". He proposes (mainly through a headlined rhetorical question) that the paper was withdrawn at the order of Elsevier

management. “Reed Elsevier’s CEO, Sir Crispin Davis. Davis, who retired in 2009 as CEO of Reed Elsevier, has served since July 2003 on the board of directors of GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) a major vaccine manufacturer (also recently appointed to the board of GSK is James Murdoch, publisher of News Corp., which owns The Times of London, the newspaper which launched the media attack on Wakefield). In 2008, vaccines accounted for 12.5% of GSK’s worldwide revenues. And although Reed Elsevier has no known vaccine liability risk, GSK has been directly exposed to two of the most prominent autism/vaccine controversies. GSK manufactured Pluserix, a version of the MMR vaccine introduced in the UK in 1989 and withdrawn in 1992 due to safety concerns. GSK also produced a thimerosal containing vaccine similar to the one examined in the primate paper (which was a Merck product) named Engerix B...”

In other words, he has no evidence that there was any communication between Cranmer and Elsevier management. He presents no example of a conflict of interest regarding vaccines by a current member of Elsevier's board. He does not offer a single example of a *vaccine currently on the market* that would be threatened by Wakefield's paper. He admits that all GSK vaccines *combined* only account for an eighth of the company's sales. He does not even try to explain what the phenomenon Wakefield and associates claimed to have observed actually has in common with autism. In fact, isn't “*delayed acquisition of reflexes*” pretty much the *opposite* of “*regressive autism*”? (The irrelevant reference to the “Urabe” MMR vaccine goes even further afield from anything relevant to autism.) In short, the scenario of “Big Pharma” successfully petitioning Elsevier to intervene in *Neurotoxicology's* editorial decisions on behalf of vaccines is admitted to be based on no evidence, and on any amount of consideration would be overkill on the order of hitting a cockroach with a rock hammer. (In other words, *I* might do it, but I'm the owner of a hammer, not a mega-multi-media conglomerate.) But this does not prevent Blaxill from calling on Cranmer “to resign as editor of *Neurotoxicology* in protest over Elsevier’s interference.”

Actually, he does offer what I expect he thinks is evidence of interference by Elsevier: He reports that Lynn Redwood, on contacting *Neurotoxicology*, was referred to Elizabeth Perrill who (shall I insert “allegedly”?) said in part, “(T)he paper should not have been accepted in *Neurotoxicology* and the paper is not suitable for the audience of *Neurotoxicology*.” Blaxill opines, “the need for an Elsevier executive to speak for Joan Cranmer on this subject raises important questions about her own editorial independence.” Actually, I think it is far more likely to reflect *Mr.* Wakefield's reputation as a litigious bully. If Cranmer had denounced Wakefield herself, his predictable response would be either a lawsuit, like several against longtime critic Brian Deer, or libels against her, like his denunciation of former supporter Richard Horton. (Blaxill unintentionally emphasizes the point by parroting the most hyperbolic complaints against Horton!) Under the circumstances, the safest course of action would be to direct inquiries to someone who can afford better lawyers!

Meanwhile, Blaxill makes some unintentional admissions of his own. Most notably, he states, “The first results from the team’s research were reported at an autism conference in London in May 2008.” This effectively confirms the suspicion of critics like Gorski/”Orac” that the study submitted to *Neurotoxicology* was simply a recapitulation of the earlier abstract. By the harshest interpretations, this “recycling” can be considered fraud. Given this admission, what I judge to be a far more serious charge is confirmed: The abstract mentions testing of 18 reflexes, where the “published” manuscript described only 13. This discrepancy points to an *intentional omission of data by Wakefield* (the same charge made by Chadwick about the *Lancet* study!) The most benign interpretation I can see is that it was established that 5 of the original tests were recognized by the authors to be too flawed for publication, a fact which if reported would have cast doubts on the results of the other 13 tests. Of course, the other explanation would be that the omitted tests did not show developmental delays! The

admission that the abstract and paper were the same study also strengthens the further suspicion that the “control” animals were added after the others had been tested. That would substantiate the suggestion of critics that the authors (of whom Hewitson appears to have been most responsible) carried out the most critical phase of their experiment without “blinding”. It also suggests that they may have failed to make “baseline” observations of unvaccinated monkeys behaving normally at the start. It doesn't help that on the one point where reported behavior could have been substantiated by entirely empirical data, by corroborating alleged delays in “suckling” by weighing the monkeys to see if they were underfed, they reported no such thing. What all this means is that the most serious criticisms of the paper have been confirmed *by AoA*, and that if what is being admitted now had been reported in an open and timely way, the paper would almost certainly have been rejected.

Then there is this: “Despite protests from study participants, on February 2nd, the same day Horton announced *The Lancet's* decision, *Neurotoxicology* informed the primate study authors of their decision not to proceed with publication in the print edition and soon removed the epub from its web-site.“ So, AoA, why didn't you report it *then*? Don't bother defending Blaxill's line that “in the middle of the media frenzy sparked by *The Lancet's* actions, the decision at *Neurotoxicology* went largely unnoticed.” Wakefield's misfortunes with the GMC and the *Lancet* did not keep you from making at least two new posts about the “monkey study” between then and when the paper was publicly withdrawn. There are only two explanations of any merit. One is that you knew perfectly well what was coming, and chose to hype the study while it lasted. (On this vein, Blaxill provides a howler as convenient ammunition: “Sadly, true to our prediction, and despite the quality of the work and the importance of the findings, it appears that the ‘attempts to nullify the evidence’ have been successful.”) The other is that Wakefield (and maybe the HB) knew but withheld the information, allowing (if not encouraging) you to set yourselves and your readers up for disappointment and embarrassment. I have just enough good will to allow the latter as a strong possibility. At the least, it would be no different from how Wakefield treated Horton and Cranmer. What is different is that, while Horton and apparently now Cranmer have recognized Wakefield for what he is and acted accordingly, AoA has (within the scenario) chosen to aid, abet and enable their own abuser!

Finally, there is this revelation in a biographical coda: “(Mark Blaxill) is a co-author of a paper published in *Neurotoxicology* and a past presenter at *Neurotoxicology* conferences. SafeMinds is a co-funder of the primate project and has been a sponsor of past *Neurotoxicology* conferences.” This supports something I have thought almost certain all along: *Neurotoxicology* has connections to the anti-vaccine movement, and these connections were a decisive factor in bringing the journal to accept a paper which probably would not even have been considered anywhere else. The journal's reward is to be used as yet another scapegoat for Wakefield, the lying, data-faking, narcissistic sociopath. So who exactly do Wakefield and AoA think will help them now?

Meanwhile, Blaxill draws attention to a more interesting story: the role of “conflict of interest” in the media. “Anti-vaxxers”, as seen egregiously here, predictably interpret the interconnectedness of the media as evidence of “conspiracy” against their particular agenda. But a far more complex and by some lights more sinister reality is at work. So many varied media have been acquired by a small number of mega-corporations that they can scarcely avoid stepping on the toes of those who are nominally part of the same corporation. Of course, it is a ludicrous conceit to think that this lends itself to direct censorship by superiors: The likes of Rupert Murdoch have no more say in what goes on in individual titles than the Sultan of the Ottomans did over the notorious local governors of the Balkans. But strange things happen.

An area I watch with particular interest is parodies: As a semi-pro author of many works of satire and

“fan fiction”, any given development here represents what could happen to me! The *reductio ad absurdum* of parody-related litigation was the [story](#) back in the mid-1990s of a threatened lawsuit between Republic Pictures and Comedy Central over the latter's planned parody of “It's a Wonderful Life”. The punchline of this episode (and the reason it stuck in my mind) is that legal threats were abruptly ended after it was discovered that *both parties were owned by the same parent company*. This weird episode entirely nullifies any suggestion that common ownership equals the sinister influence of “conflict of interest”. On the contrary, it can serve to broaden what one media “venue” can do with material from another. To give another egregious example, I, even I, fearless author/perpetrator of “Aliens Vs. Exotroopers” among other offenses, was amazed by the *Family Guy* “Blue Harvest” parody's brazen imitation of its *Star Wars* source material, with the use of John Williams' soundtrack being especially striking. The only way I can imagine that the “Family Guy” crew got away with this is that their program and *Star Wars* are both properties of Fox Studios (which is first in line to sue me if anyone ever does).

This, I think, is what the “debate” over vaccines and autism amounts to. Wakefield et al may have won an inside edge by playing to the archetypes of “David and Goliath” and of course “Galileo”, but in the longer run, the media has preferred simply to farm themselves out to both sides, like Krupp, the original “Merchants of Death”, encouraging brushfire wars between customers. Elsevier has egregiously followed this pattern, owning the journals that originally published Wakefield's research, like the *Lancet*, the ones that demolished said research, like *the Lancet* again, and the few journals still willing to give an “autism-vaccine link” a hearing, like *Neurotoxicology* and the infamous *Medical Hypotheses*. So, do anti-vaxxers complain that both they and their opponents have been abused by Elsevier's thoughtless or cynical management? No, they accuse Elsevier of plotting against them all along, just because one of this media empire's lesser vassals finally threw them out.

I will speak last of AoA's handling of me. I have at this point been the target of abuse at one point or another by pretty much everyone in AoA's higher echelons: Mark Blaxill, Kim Stagliano, Jake Crosby, Dan Olmsted, and even the lawsuit-happy Hairy Biped. What I find striking is that, apart from early brushes with Blaxill and Stagliano on AoA and with Crosby elsewhere, they have refused to acknowledge my works in any way. While I have every reason to take offense at this, and do, I see an upside. Because they refuse to identify my work, they also decline to criticize or even identify me by name. What I gather from this is that they won't poke this Possum with a ten-foot stick! Why, the HB won't even throw a threat of a lawsuit my way! I will not be conceited and suppose that this is fear on their part. But I do believe that, to whatever extent they understand me, they know I am not a target they can handle by their usual methods. I promptly challenge false claims they make, and know where I can go to present my message when they censor my corrections. I have no background in medicine or business that they can spin “conflict of interest” out of. While I use a fictional avatar, I make absolutely no attempt to hide my identity, so they can't fantasize such a background for me either. And, of course, I have absolutely no fear of lawsuits. Rather than try to attack me personally, I suspect they would rather treat me as a faceless, nameless cog in their imagined “Big Pharma” conspiracy machine.

Thus, to close, I will offer this excerpt from an upcoming “fan fic” installment: “When you're alone, and afraid, you get used to it. You get used to hiding, so you stop asking yourself what you're hiding from. You get used to losing, so you stop fighting. You get used to no help from anyone, so you stop asking for it. But someday, you look back on all the road behind you, the dragons you could have slain but never fought, the things you could have done but never tried, the walls you tried to climb when you could have knocked them down... and you wish there was a way to go back. A way to do things differently, or even just to know what *could* have been if just once, you had stopped and said, ‘This far and no farther!’”

This is pretty much my own experiences in a fictionalized context. There are many times, especially in my childhood and early adulthood, when what I backed down, backed out or hunkered down when I wish I hadn't. I can't say it won't happen again, but when I know things come down to the choice between being silent and calling a liar and a bully what he is, I will certainly do the latter. I will not let Wakefield's libels, AoA's censorship, or even the HB's infamous lawyers stop me from calling things like I see them. No one else should either. I believe that anyone who follows my example will find that, when their bluffs are called, they will back down or never show up. Even if your experiences do not go as smoothly as mine, I believe you will still find that no amount of trouble will feel as regrettable as the times you backed down.

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