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## BOOK REVIEW

David Nyberg, PhD

### ***The Doctor Who Fooled the World: Science, Deception, and the War on Vaccines***

Brian Deer

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020

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**Salus populi suprema lex esto**

(The health/safety of the people is the supreme law.)

— Cicero, *De Legibus*

Why spend time on a book about a physician who violated this supreme law, who is a self-serving charlatan, who has been struck from the medical register in Great Britain “on charges of fraud, dishonesty, and a ‘callous disregard’ for children’s suffering”?

Why spend time on a book about a notorious former medical doctor whose scandalous pseudo research, published first by *The Lancet* in 1998 (later retracted as utterly false), caused an international crisis in children’s health?

Most *JMR* readers will already be at least casually acquainted with Andrew Wakefield’s catalytic (and cataclysmic) role in spawning an anti-vaccination panic focused on measles and autism, and now spread more widely to include the COVID-19 pandemic. This charismatic charade of staggering

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#### WHY SPEND TIME ON A BOOK ABOUT A NOTORIOUS MEDICAL DOCTOR WHO CAUSED AN INTENTIONAL CRISIS IN CHILDREN’S HEALTH?

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audacity has enflamed a “vaccine hesitancy” that international agencies describe as among the top ten threats to human health. So, why pay more attention now?

Here’s why.

First, this book luridly illustrates for the medical community something that is going on more broadly in our socio/political ethos which supports cultish devotion to certain individuals who repeat false claims of “cure” for contrived nightmares.

Second, this incontrovertible analysis reminds us that legitimate investigative journalists are important and worth supporting. Brian Deer’s reporting did not come easily. Wakefield’s enablers in the medical establishment and various media outlets persistently interfered with Deer’s efforts to ask and answer the right questions.

Third, deception is much more complex than simple lying. It is instructive to see how “The Big Lie,” once established in the public perception by tireless belligerent repetition, is then protected by whack-a-mole tactics and immense pretension. Consider this definition of deception as compared to simple blatant lying. It captures Wakefield’s manner and exuberant avarice.

*Deception is the shrewd and sober art of “showing and hiding,” which is meant to control what is and is not perceived, assumed, or understood. The point is to present a situation in a way that will encourage some person(s) to develop a confident but mistaken hypothesis, which in some way serves [the deceiver’s] purpose. Or we could say that deceiving is the business of persuasion aided by the art of selective display.*

Wakefield’s fraudulent work on twelve carefully selected children that promoted a non-existent relation between autism and the MMR vaccine, first published in *The Lancet* and later exposed to be incompetent in method, ethically and financially improper, and criminally deceptive in reporting, nonetheless propelled the then Doctor to notoriety as the drum major in the march toward anti-vaccine hysteria. (*The Lancet* Editor-in-Chief, an earlier collaborator of Wakefield’s, suffered his own comeuppance.)

Deer’s compelling narrative of Wakefield’s deception is part biography, part a meticulous solution to a sociomedical mystery that endured for almost two decades, and part a more general warning against the power of those who foment fear, helplessness, and even guilt among a vulnerable public, then cunningly supply ‘answers’ that benefit themselves, but always by pleading in the name of the vulnerable. This common play in politics is less common



in medicine, but it is there. (I'll mention that Deer references Donald Trump's similar charismatic, audacious, and rhetorical style several times, but I will not comment further.)

This solemn and gripping narrative has frequent pops of color that are amusing:

"...they were as popular with the medical establishment as a hair in an after-dinner brandy."

"Naysayers squawked like Hitchcock ravens."

"...in the country beyond Hampstead, his profile now loomed like a whitecoat leper messiah."

"What lingered, however, was an impression of ambition going somewhat beyond expertise."

"The temptation with medicine is like reading Shakespeare: you hope the tricky words will make sense from their context."

We must admit that the honorable profession of medicine is host not only to myriad honorable women and men, but also to some notable

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scoundrels, frauds, and reprobates. Andrew Wakefield (now banned from medicine after a 12-year investigation!) is such a one. The stench he created in his pseudo-vaccine science promotional scheme hovers still, like smog, and naïfs goaded by a few celebrities (e. g., Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.) still breathe it in, believing it to be clean air.

A lesson learned: "Courage in science isn't proving yourself right. It's in your efforts to prove yourself wrong." Wakefield's values are reflected in his main motive: to prove he was right, no matter what, and to be in denial and untroubled by regret when successfully challenged. This is a case of charisma trumping confirmation, of Ego trumping Ergo.

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### DECEPTION IS THE SHREWEDEST AND SOBER ART OF "SHOWING AND HIDING."

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The question remains in whom to trust. Brian Deer's report of his relentless pursuit of truth has provided us with reason to believe there are more like him to help us in this dire time when so many 'post-truthers' are featured in the news. If we pay close attention to the Brian Deers out there and act with persistence on what we learn, perhaps a sizeable number of the latent Wakefield-like rogues and miscreants in medicine will fade and fail. ■

#### About the Author

David Nyberg, PhD, served 12 years as a public member of the Maine Board of Licensure in Medicine, and continues to serve the Board, as a consultant and as Editor-in-Chief of its newsletter. He is a retired member of the teaching faculty in the Maine Medical Center's Department of Psychiatry.

#### Reference

Nyberg D. *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.