

Scientists have found new evidence to support fears that the MMR vaccine is causing children to develop autism and bowel disease, The Telegraph can reveal today.

Specialists from Trinity College, Dublin, have detected the strain of measles virus used in the MMR jab in tissue samples from the inflamed intestines of 12 children, who each developed autism after receiving the injection.

The results will add further weight to claims that MMR may be responsible for a rapid rise in autism in children over the past decade.

The Department of Health has repeatedly dismissed concerns about its safety, saying epidemiological studies have failed to find a link to autism. It has infuriated worried parents by refusing to allow the alternative of single vaccines to be prescribed on the NHS.

The work was carried out by Prof John O'Leary, a pathologist with a record of important discoveries in the field of virology. Although the finding does not prove that the MMR jab caused autism and bowel disease in the children, it raises urgent questions about the vaccine's role in their condition.

None of the children concerned had shown any sign of disease beforehand. The discovery comes days after the Government seized on a new study to bolster its claims that the MMR vaccine is safe.

The review, from a commercial company which lists the Department of Health as one of its clients, did not, however, consider work published since 1998 by scientists concerned about MMR.

Prof O'Leary's results have been made public in a precis of a scientific presentation released ahead of a meeting of the Pathological Society of Great Britain and Ireland next month. It was greeted with alarm by parents last night.

Jackie Fletcher, of the parents' group JABS, said the findings had profound implications and must be taken seriously. "We have parents shouting that these problems are occurring and what do the Government and health chiefs do - they keep their heads buried in old reports not designed to identify these problems," she said. "No one is listening. Why?"

Ann Hewitt, whose son Thomas, eight, has severe autism and bowel problems, learned earlier this year that Dr O'Leary had found measles virus in the boy's gut. She and scores of others who received the same news now want to know what is going on.

The new results follow a study by Prof O'Leary and his colleagues, reported in February, in which they found measles virus of unknown origin in gut biopsies from 75 of 91 autistic children with bowel problems.

Measles virus was found in only five of 70 normal youngsters. The team now claims that the new study corroborates their earlier work linking measles virus with the condition and "indicates the origins of the virus to be vaccine strain".

Last night Visceral, a charity set up to fund research into autism and bowel disease, called for MMR to be suspended until studies establish just what the vaccine-strain virus is doing. MMR, which contains live measles mumps and rubella virus, was launched in the UK in 1988 and is given to infants at 12-15 months and four years.

The samples tested in Dublin were from some of nearly 200 youngsters diagnosed with developmental disorder and "new variant inflammatory bowel disease" by doctors at the Royal Free Hospital, in London, where Dr Andrew Wakefield worked until he was ousted last December.

The controversy over MMR and autism began four years ago when Dr Wakefield and his colleagues reported in The Lancet on 12 children with autistic problems and bowel disease and revealed that the parents of eight of them had said their children regressed developmentally after receiving the MMR jab.

While the genetic code of the strain of measles virus used in MMR differs only minutely from that of the virus responsible for natural infections, Prof O'Leary and his colleagues were able to use a commercially produced molecular probe to distinguish the two.

The probe was designed to detect a single difference in the genetic code of the viruses and to give off a fluorescent signal when it does so. The MMR row became so heated this year that Tony Blair, the Prime Minister - who has refused to say whether his two-year-old son Leo has had the MMR jab - accused Dr Wakefield and the media of "scaremongering" on the issue.

The chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, has indicated he would rather resign than abandon official policy on the three-in-one vaccine.

Dr Wakefield said last night: "Prof O'Leary and colleagues have now provided what may prove to be the most important piece of evidence to date in the case against the MMR vaccine. Parents must at the very least be given a choice of single vaccines.

"Not to do so in the face of these data and all the other evidence we have now published would be negligent in the extreme. It is not acceptable to assume that this vaccine virus is an innocent bystander if your concern is for the safety of the children."

By Lorraine Fraser, 16th June, 2002. With permission www.telegraph.co.uk

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