

## **Vaccines expert warns studies are useless**

**By Lorraine Fraser, Medical Correspondent**

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Most safety studies on childhood vaccines have not been conducted thoroughly enough to tell whether the jabs cause side effects, a leading authority on vaccine research has warned.

Dr Thomas Jefferson, who has been funded to investigate vaccine safety by the European Commission, said that the issue was the "Cinderella" of public health research and that Government officials had failed to make it a high priority.

Dr Jefferson is the head of the vaccine division of the Cochrane Collaboration, an organisation of scientists that aims to make accurate information about the effects of treatments available worldwide and promotes high standards in research.

He is also a board member of the European Programme for Improved Vaccine Safety Surveillance, set up by the commission.

He said: "There is some good research, but it is overwhelmed by the bad. The public has been let down because the proper studies have not been done."

His outspoken and unprecedented comments will anger public health officials in Britain and elsewhere, who fear that any discussion will undermine parents' confidence in national vaccination programmes.

Officials at the Department of Health are already alarmed by the number of parents shunning the triple measles, mumps and rubella jab (MMR) after claims that it is linked with autism and bowel disease.

Although Dr Jefferson emphasised that there was no evidence to suggest that any vaccine now in use was dangerous, he said that there was a "dearth" of sound studies on the risks and benefits.

As a result, the information available on the safety of vaccines that are routinely given to babies and toddlers was "simply inadequate".

Dr Jefferson also disclosed plans for a Europe-wide electronic register of children's vaccine exposure that would allow scientists to investigate the risks and benefits of inoculations using data on thousands of participants. Pilot schemes will start soon in Sweden and Finland.

"We need such a system urgently," he said. "Governments are reluctant to accept this but in my view they owe it to future generations to back this idea."

He was especially concerned, he said, because future vaccination programmes were likely to involve giving children "five, six, even seven vaccines all at once".

A vaccine designed to protect children against measles, mumps, rubella and chickenpox in one shot is already under development.

"For people like me, it is becoming more and more difficult to tease out what problems may be due to an individual vaccine," said Dr Jefferson.

"It is almost becoming impossible to do this. We have to think very carefully about how we will monitor these vaccines.

"We have a responsibility to these children - they are our future. It is no use having a situation where someone suggests a possible harm and everyone runs around frantically trying to find bits of evidence. What is required is good-quality information that has been systematically collated and assessed."