David Kirby stood in front of hun­
at very room and gave his version
vice," he said of the government's
mpensation. "And the short version
words, 'Hannah's autism was caused
n of her underlying mitochondrial

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Almost exactly three months after Evidence of Harm hit book­
stores, Rolling Stone and the online magazine Salon.com si­
multaneously published "Deadly Immunity," a 4,700-word
ory on mercury in vaccines written by Robert F. Kennedy; Jr. Ken­
nedy, the eldest son and namesake of the former attorney general and
New York senator, described how he'd come to investigate the issue:
"I was drawn into the controversy only reluctantly. As an attorney
and environmentalist who has spent years working on issues of mer­
cury toxicity, I frequently met mothers of autistic children who were
absolutely convinced that their kids had been injured by vaccines. Pri­
vately, I was skeptical."

Then, he wrote, he began to look at the information these par­
ents had collected. He pored over the transcript from the 2000 CDC­
organized meeting at the Simpsonwood lodge outside Atlanta and
spoke with members of SafeMinds and Generation Rescue. He also
studied the work of the "only two scientists" who had managed to
gain access to government data on the safety of vaccines: "Dr. Mark
Geier, president of the Genetics Center of America, and his son,
David." In the past three years alone, Kennedy wrote, "the Geiers
have completed six studies that demonstrate a powerful correlation
between thimerosal and neurological damage in children."
It wasn't long before Kennedy became convinced that he'd stumbled upon "a chilling case study of institutional arrogance, power and greed." If, as he believed to be the case, "our public-health authorities knowingly allowed the pharmaceutical industry to poison an entire generation of American children, their actions arguably constitute one of the biggest scandals in the annals of American medicine."

Kennedy went on to quote SafeMinds' Mark Blaxill, whom he identified as the vice president of "a nonprofit organization concerned about the role of mercury in medicine," as Blaxill accused the CDC of "incompetence and gross negligence" and claimed that the damage done by vaccines was "bigger than asbestos, bigger than tobacco, bigger than anything you've ever seen."

In the article's final paragraph, Kennedy warned his readers of the scandal's likely effects on the future: "It's hard to calculate the damage to our country—and to the international efforts to eradicate epidemic diseases—if Third World nations come to believe that America's most heralded foreign-aid initiative is poisoning their children. It's not difficult to predict how this scenario will be interpreted by America's enemies abroad."

Unlike David Kirby, Kennedy did not have the luxury of threading these indictments through hundreds of pages; as a result, the magnitude of the implied conspiracy was more immediately obvious. In order for what Kennedy was claiming to be true, scientists and officials in governmental agencies, nonprofit organizations, and publicly held companies around the world would need to be part of a coordinated multi-decade scheme to prop up "the vaccine industry's bottom line" by masking the dangers of thimerosal.

In Kennedy's telling, the plotting had been going on since the Great Depression, but it had begun in renewed earnest five years earlier "at the isolated Simpsonwood conference center," a location that Kennedy said was chosen because it was "nestled in wooded farmland next to the Chattahoochee River, to ensure complete secrecy." (In reality, the location was chosen because a series of previously scheduled conferences had booked up all the hotel rooms within fifty miles of Atlanta.) Kennedy relied on the 286-page transcript of the Simpsonwood conference to corroborate his allegations—and wherever the transcript diverged from the story he wanted to tell, he simply cut and pasted until things came out right. Again and again, he used participants' warnings about the reckless manipulation of scientific data by people with ulterior motives to do the very thing they were afraid would happen. The CDC's Robert Chen was one of the victims of Kennedy's approach. His actual quote is as follows:

Before we all leave, someone raised a very good process question that all of us as a group needs to address, and that is this information of all the copies we have received and are taking back home to your institutions, to what extent should people feel free to make copies to distribute to others in their organization? We have been privileged so far that given the sensitivity of information, we have been able to manage to keep it out of, let's say, less responsible hands, yet the nature of kind of proliferation, and Xerox machines being what they are, the risk of that changes. So I guess as a group perhaps, and Roger [Bernier, the associate director of science at the National Immunization Program], you may have thought about that?

In Kennedy's hands, it became this:

Dr. Bob Chen, head of vaccine safety for the CDC, expressed relief that "given the sensitivity of the information, we have been able to keep it out of the hands of, let's say, less responsible hands."

Even more egregious was Kennedy's slicing and dicing of a lengthy statement by the World Health Organization's John Clements. In this
instance, Kennedy transposed sentences and left out words. Here is what actually appeared in the transcript, with italics added to indicate the sentences Kennedy used in his story:

And I really want to risk offending everyone in the room by saying that perhaps this study should not have been done at all, because the outcome of it could have, to some extent, been predicted and we have all reached this point now where we are left hanging....

There is now the point at which the research results have to be handled, and even if this committee decides that there is no association and that information gets out, the work has been done and through Freedom of Information that will be taken by others and will be used in other ways beyond the control of this group. And I am very concerned about that as I suspect it is already too late to do anything regardless of any professional body and what they say....

My message would be that any other study—and, I like the study that has just been described here very much, I think it makes a lot of sense—but it has to be thought through. What are the potential outcomes and how will you handle it? How will it be presented to a public and a media that is hungry for selecting the information they want to use for whatever means they have in store for them?

In "Deadly Immunity," that was changed to read:

Dr. John Clements, vaccines advisor at the World Health Organization, declared flatly that the study "should not have been done at all" and warned that the results "will be taken by others and will be used in ways beyond the control of this group. The research results have to be handled."

To top it all off, Kennedy married together two separate comments made by the developmental biologist and pediatrician Robert Brent. In the first one, Brent said:

In a distortion that the editor of a high school newspaper would have balked at, Kennedy took these two statements, switched their order, and ran them together.*

We are in a bad position from the standpoint of defending any lawsuits," said Dr. Robert Brent, a pediatrician at the Alfred I.

Thirty-eight pages later, Brent addressed the topic of "junk scientists":

The medical/legal findings in this study, causal or not, are horrendous and therefore it is important that the suggested epidemiological, pharmacokinetic and animal studies be performed. If an allegation was made that a child's neurobehavioral findings were caused by thimerosal containing vaccines, you could readily find a junk scientist who would support the claim with "a reasonable degree of certainty." But you will not find a scientist with any integrity who would say the reverse with the data that is available. And that is true. So we are in a bad position from the standpoint of defending any lawsuits if they were initiated and I am concerned.

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*A Conspiracy of Dunces

Finally, the thing that concerns me the most, those who know me, I have been a pin stick in the litigation community because of the nonsense of our litigious society. This will be a resource to our very busy plaintiff attorneys in this country when this information becomes available. They don't want valid data. At least that is my biased opinion. They want business and this could potentially be a lot of business.
duPont Hospital for Children in Delaware. "This will be a resource to our very busy plaintiff attorneys in this country."

In the overall scheme of the piece, that type of quote massaging was considered so insignificant that it didn’t warrant inclusion in the more than five hundred words’ worth of “notes,” “clarifications,” and “corrections” that were eventually appended to the piece. (The misuse of Chen’s quote wasn’t acknowledged either.) Among the issues that were addressed were incorrect attributions, inaccuracies about which vaccines contained thimerosal at different points in time, a misrepresentation of the number of shots children had received in the 1980s, and a false claim about a scientist having a patent on the measles vaccine.

None of this put a dent in Kennedy’s conviction that his allegations were valid, and in the weeks and months to come, he kept on repeating many of the errors Rolling Stone and Salon.com had already publicly acknowledged were wrong. Just four days after a correction confirmed that the story had misstated the levels of ethylmercury infants had received—it was actually “40 percent, not 187 times, greater than the EPA’s limit for daily exposure to methyl mercury”—Kennedy told MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough, “We are injecting our children with four hundred times the amount of mercury that FDA or EPA considers safe.” Kennedy also told Scarborough that children were being given twenty-four vaccines and that each one of them had “this thimerosal, this mercury in them.” Those statements were not even remotely true: In 2005, the CDC recommended that children under twelve years old receive a total of eight vaccines that protected against a dozen different diseases. Only three of those vaccines had ever contained thimerosal, and all had been manufactured without the preservative since 2001.

That Scarborough didn’t ask Kennedy to produce evidence supporting his accusations is not surprising: Scarborough had long had a hunch that vaccines were to blame for his teenage son’s “slight form of autism called Asperger’s.” Kennedy’s research, it seemed, had confirmed his suspicions once and for all. “There’s no doubt in my mind,” Scarborough said, “and maybe it’s two years from now, maybe it’s five years from now, maybe it’s ten years from now—we are going to find out thimerosal causes, in my opinion, autism.”
Wakefield and two other doctors who worked on the 1998 paper had committed "serious professional misconduct." In 2005, the GMC released a list of eleven preliminary charges, which included acting "in a manner likely to bring the medical profession into disrepute" and subjecting children to "unnecessary and invasive investigations.")

In an impartial setting, Deer's articles and the subsequent GMC inquiry would have raised concerns that Wakefield had used children as guinea pigs and fudged results in an effort to advance his career and fatten his wallet. Among Wakefield's supporters, the findings were viewed as just the latest effort on the part of cowed governments, powerful business interests, and mercenary journalists to suppress the truth. This reaction is not surprising: By that point, the anti-vaccine movement had come to embody the qualities that David Aaronovitch identifies in his book Voodoo Histories as characteristic of history's most enduring conspiracy theories, from the belief that the moon landing was a hoax to a conviction that HIV and AIDS were developed by drug companies in conjunction with the CIA:

These include an appeal to precedent, self-heroization, contempt for the benighted masses, a claim to be only asking "disturbing questions," invariably exaggerating the status and expertise of supporters, the use of apparently scholarly ways of laying out arguments (or "death by footnote"), the appropriation of imagined Secret Service jargon, circularity in logic, hydra-headedness in growing new arguments as soon as old ones are mopped off, and, finally, the exciting suggestion of persecution.

Whenever Wakefield was involved, persecution wasn't just suggested, it was stipulated. True to form, he cast the litany of charges as yet another example of the personal sacrifices he made for the sickest and most helpless members of society. "I have [already] lost my job," he said. "But if you come in to me and say, 'This has happened to my child'—what's my job? What did I sign up to when I went into medicine? To look after your child... I'm here to address the concerns
May. Of course, he replied—in fact, he said, he was keen on sending me a copy. "You might want to read it and decide whether it has a market in Israel, to see if anyone wants to find out what went wrong and why it went wrong," he said. "You may want to decide if it's worth translating into Hebrew." It was one of the few times in my life I have ever been stumped into silence. The only context in which Wakefield had ever known me was as a reporter writing about a controversy that he'd help to start; in fact, on several occasions he'd stressed that he was limited in what he could share with me because he needed to marshal material for his memoir-cum-exposé. We'd never once had a conversation about our personal lives, never mind our religious backgrounds. (As it happens, I am Jewish. I do not, however, speak Hebrew.) I awkwardly tried to change the subject. Then, just as we were getting off the phone, he reminded me to stay in touch regarding "getting involved with the translation." "Certainly your English is very good, so that's not a problem," he said. "But you may be too busy to do it—or you might have some recommendations."

On Monday, May 24, 2010, Andrew Wakefield's name was officially struck off of the U.K.'s medical register, which left him without a job or the ability to practice his chosen profession. Later that week, he received a standing ovation at the AutismOne conference in Chicago, where he also headlined a rally, gave two presentations, took part in an Age of Autism panel, posed for pictures with Bob Sears, and held a book signing. Wakefield might have been a lightning rod for negative attention from state medical boards and public health agencies, but it appeared as if his support among his core followers was as strong as ever. As Jay Gordon wrote in a blog post on his Web site, "I spent Saturday at an incredible conference in Chicago. Any thoughts I ever had about wavering in my support of Andrew Wakefield have dissolved. Jay."

In the years since the conversation with my friend that launched this project, there's been a dramatic rise in the number of communities where vaccination rates have fallen below the 90 to 95 percent threshold needed to maintain herd immunity. An overwhelming percentage of those are left-leaning, well-educated enclaves demographically similar to the neighborhood in which I live. The city that's gotten the most attention as of late is Ashland, Oregon, which is home to a nationally renowned Shakespeare festival and the Ashland Independent Film Festival and has a vaccine exemption rate of around 30 percent, which is the highest in the country. Just north of San Francisco, Marin County, which has the fifth-highest average-per-capita income in the United States, has an exemption rate more than three times that of the rest of California. A recent Los Angeles Times investigation identified two hundred Southern California schools where outbreaks are more likely "in large part because of parents choosing not to immunize... Most are schools in affluent areas." One of those schools is the Ocean Charter School in Del Rey, California, where an entire century's worth of medical advances have effectively been reversed: Since the 2007-2008 school year, between 40 and 60 percent of incoming kindergarteners have been exempted from vaccines. Administrators told the Times those figures were no surprise, because the school's "nontraditional curriculum" attracted "well-educated parents who tend to be skeptical of mainstream beliefs." "They question traditional knowledge," the school's assistant director said, "and feel empowered to make their own decisions for their families, not deferring to traditional wisdom."

The situation is much the same throughout the rest of the country. Between 2005 and 2010, the rates of unvaccinated children doubled in New York and Connecticut and rose by 800 percent in New Jersey. Meg Fisher, the head of the AAP's section on infectious diseases, said she almost never came across parents who asked for exemptions when her practice was located in inner-city Philadelphia. Now that she works in the suburbs of New Jersey, she encounters them all the time.

The consequences of these trends are as tragic as they are predictable. In 2009, six unvaccinated children in southeastern Pennsylvania
were infected with Hib, a disease that was assumed to have been eliminated in the United States twenty years ago. Two of them died. In May 2010, a mumps outbreak that began the previous summer, when an eleven-year-old unvaccinated boy from Brooklyn was infected during a trip to England, was tracked all the way to Los Angeles. In October, the California Department of Public Health announced that a statewide whooping cough epidemic had already caused more than 5,500 infections, which put the state on pace to record the highest number of cases since 1950, when the pertussis vaccine was just entering widespread use. By that point, nine children had already died. Eight of them were infected when they were less than two months old, which is the age at which infants are scheduled to receive their first dose of the DPT vaccine.

It's tempting to place the blame for this state of affairs squarely on the shoulders of people like Andrew Wakefield; after all, it would be hard to think up a character more sinister than someone who pays children for their blood. But that's the easy way out: Wakefield might have provided the spark, and any number of other charlatans and hucksters might have fanned the flames, but it's the media that provided—and continues to provide—the fuel for this particular fire. In February 2010, a month after the GMC issued its ruling and a year after the dual-causation Omnibus decisions were handed down, a columnist for The Boston Globe wrote about how she was worried that vaccinating her son could lead to "the moment he'd slip away...for every scientific study that rejects a link between vaccines and autism, there's a heartbreaking, unprovable, irrefutable anecdotal story that says otherwise." Four months later, the Globe used the occasion of Wakefield's loss of his medical license to run another column on the issue of autism and vaccines. The main subject of that piece was Wakefield ally Richard Deth, an "undeterred" Northeastern University professor of pharmacology who "believes in the possibilities of outside-the-mainstream therapies and research" and is "intrigued by the use of special diets and supplements" to treat autism. Deth's conclusions, the columnist wrote, "didn't seem very controversial."

She was right. Deth's conclusions aren't controversial: virtually everyone else in his field agrees that they're wrong. This is not information that requires a lot of research to uncover. Deth's testimony as an expert witness in one of the Omnibus cases prompted George Hastings to write, in his ruling in the Cedillo trial, a nine-page, point-by-point summary of the various deficiencies of Deth's theories. Hastings concluded his analysis by writing, "There were also a number of other specific points concerning which Dr. Deth's presentation was again shown to be erroneous, too numerous to detail here."

The type of journalism that relies on the reporter's notion of what does or doesn't "seem" correct or controversial is self-indulgent and irresponsible. It gives credence to the belief that we can intuit our way through all the various decisions we need to make in our lives and it validates the notion that our feelings are a more reliable barometer of reality than the facts.

Make no mistake: the repercussions of this outlook extend far beyond this specific issue. According to NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, 2005 was the hottest year ever recorded; 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007, and 2009 are tied for second. (As of October 15, 2010 is on pace to take over the top spot.) During that time, the percentage of the population that said global warming is not a problem has doubled. Over the past several years, a number of states have either introduced or passed laws mandating that students be tutored in misinformation: In February 2010, both houses of the Kentucky legislature began considering a "science education and intellectual freedom" bill that "encourages" teachers to promote "critical thinking skills" about the "advantages and disadvantages of scientific theories...including but not limited to the study of evolution, the origins of life, global warming, and human cloning." Louisiana has already passed a nearly identical law, and in 2009, the Texas Board of Education passed a curriculum that requires schools to teach "all sides" of evolution and the "strengths and weaknesses" of global warming.

Just as I was finishing my research for this book, my wife gave birth to our first child. Like hundreds of thousands of new parents
around the world, vaccines scare me—but when I sneak into my son’s room at night to watch him sleep, I don’t worry that the day he gets his MMR shot will be the day he “slips away.” Instead, I worry that he might be one of those children for whom a given vaccine isn’t effective, or that he’ll come into contact with someone infected with Hib or measles or whooping cough before he’s old enough to have gotten all his shots. I worry that he’ll end up in a pediatric ICU because some parent decided the Internet was more trustworthy than the AMA and the AAP.

As my son grows older, I hope that, similar to the parents of children at the Ocean Charter School, he will feel empowered to make his own decisions and will have the self-confidence to challenge traditional wisdom. I also hope that he learns the difference between critical thinking and getting swept up in a wave of self-righteous hysteria, and I hope he considers the effects of his actions on those around him. Finally, for his sake and for that of everyone else alive, I hope he grows up in a world where science is acknowledged not as an ideology but as the best tool we have for understanding the universe, and where striving for the truth is recognized as the most noble quest humanity will ever undertake.

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In January 2009, a twenty-seven-year-old former Obama staffer named Kevin Hartnett got in touch with me for advice about building a career as a writer. I told him in no uncertain terms that he was making the worst decision of his professional life. For the sake of his marriage and his sanity, I urged him to seek work in an industry that wasn’t in the midst of an epic collapse.

Two weeks later, I asked Kevin if he was interested in helping me with some research for a book I was working on. Since that day, there is no one I have relied on more. To say that The Panic Virus would not have been completed without him would be downplaying his contributions: He transcribed hour upon hour of interviews, waded through hundreds of pages of dense scholarship, prepared reports on topics ranging from memory manipulation to tort reform, and helped wrestle an unwieldy manuscript into submission. Over the past six months, he has been as close to a writing partner as I have ever had. Oftentimes, I would write until two or three in the morning, Kevin would start reading my copy at seven A.M., and by the time I was back at my computer, my frenzied scribblings would be well on their way to coherence. I have no doubt that his name will be on the cover of many excellent books of his own in years to come.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Kevin’s wife, Caroline, and their son, James, for their indulgence and understanding. Kristin Hartnett Sheppe, Kevin’s younger sister, performed the herculean task of
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