Fears of 2,000 heart attacks and strokes linked to statins controversy

* [Laura Donnelly](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/laura-donnelly/), health editor

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More than 2,000 more people could suffer heart attacks and strokes after soaring numbers came off statins in the wake of controversial BMJ research, a study suggests.

Researchers said “misleading” claims about levels of side-effects linked to the cholesterol-busting drugs had been followed by a spike in the number of patients coming off statins.

In October 2013, the BMJ published two articles questioning the value of extending the use of statins to large sections of the public.

They came as health watchdogs [drew up plans to halve the risk thresholds for the drugs, making 40 per cent of adults eligible for them](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/laura-donnelly/10632047/Statins-12-million-Brits-will-be-advised-to-take-cholesterol-lowering-drug.html).

Amid a [public debate about “mass medicalisation” of the public](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/10537507/Britain-becomes-statins-capital-of-Europe-according-to-study.html), the BMJ [retracted a claim](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/11007618/British-Medical-Journal-acted-correctly-over-statins.html) made in one of the pieces – that one in five on statins would suffer side-effects.

Now research by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine suggests that in the six months following the 2013 study, the number of patients coming off statins dropped by around 12 per cent.

The findings – also published in the BMJ – said the trend amounted to around 200,000 patients stopping treatment over the period.

Researchers behind the new study said this could mean 2,000 more heart attacks, strokes and cardiovascular events occurring over the next decade – one third of which could prove lethal.

The research examined UK patients over 40 who stopped or started taking statins between January 2011 and March 2015.

It found that in the six months from October 2013, the number of patients stopping statins, after being prescribed them because they were thought to be at high risk of developing heart disease within the next 10 years, fell by 12 per cent.

A similar fall was found among those taking statins for existing heart disease.

Study author Professor Liam Smeeth said the 2013 articles by Dr John Abrahmson, from Harvard Medical School, and UK cardiologist Dr Aseem Malhotra, had included “misleading” claims which influenced the public debate on statins.

Prof Peter Weissberg, medical director of the British Heart Foundation, which funded the new research, suggested that the BMJ had published controversial views in order to “sell copy”.

The cardiologist said: "Twenty to 25 years ago all of the main medical journals were wholly objective, they would publish data, they would publish objective editorials that look at the balance, we now know that several of the leading medical journals have now got axes to grind.

“The BMJ for example have made it no secret that they do not like the medicalisation of the normal population, not just when it comes to statins but pregnant women and all sorts of walks of life, in the aged, in terminal care and the like,” he said.

Dr Fiona Godlee, editor in chief of the BMJ, defended its record.

She said: "It seems to me absolutely right that there is public debate about the benefits and harms of treatments.

"Patients may now be better aware of several things. First, that we have far less good information on the side effects of statins than on their benefits. Secondly, that for some people, especially those at lower risk of heart disease, the survival benefit from statins may not outweigh the negatives of taking a drug every day with all that this entails.”

She said the debate had highlighted the fact that complete trial data on statins are not available for independent scrutiny.

“This should shock people. It continues to shock me,” she said.

* Trouble-shooters brought in by cash-strapped NHS bodies are being paid rates of almost £400,000 a year, an investigation has found. Clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) – which hold local budgets - have hired “turnaround directors” on rates of more than £30,000 a month, after being warned of financial problems, Health Service Journal disclosed.