**Row on statins led to big treatment drop**

* AAP
* 9:34AM June 29, 2016

Controversy surrounding cholesterol-lowering statin drugs led to more than 200,000 patients stopping their treatment over a six-month period, a new study suggests.

As a result, around 2000 people may suffer a cardiovascular event such as a heart attack or stroke, experts have predicted.

In October 2013, two articles were published in The British Medical Journal (BMJ) that questioned the value of extending the use of statins to healthy people at low risk of heart disease.

Then in February 2014 reporting on the issue rocketed after the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence launched draft guidance suggesting larger proportions of the population should be prescribed the drugs in a bid to prevent cases of heart disease, heart attacks and strokes.

The next month, leading medical academic Professor Sir Rory Collins criticised articles published in The BMJ.

Researchers looked to see whether this period of public debate affected the likelihood of patients taking statins.

After examining UK prescribing data, they looked at people aged 40 and over who stopped and started taking statins each month from January 2011 to March 2015.

They found that among patients who were taking the drug because they were deemed to have a high risk of developing disease in the next 10 years there was a 12 per cent increased likelihood of stopping statins in the six months following the period of public scrutiny.

And among patients taking statins for existing heart disease, there was an 11 per cent likelihood they would stop, according to the study published in The BMJ.

Overall, they estimated that this equated to 219,000 people who stopped taking statins – and this could lead to over 2000 extra cardiovascular events, such as heart attacks, over the next 10 years.

Study author Professor Liam Smeeth from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: "Our findings suggest that widespread coverage of health stories in the mainstream media can have an important, real-world impact on the behaviour of patients and doctors. This may have significant consequences for people’s health."

Dr Fiona Godlee, editor in chief of The BMJ said: "It seems to me absolutely right that there is public debate about the benefits and harms of treatments."