‘Scaremongering’ over statins may have caused 2,000 deaths

**Chris Smyth, Health Editor**

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The British Heart Foundation has accused the *The BMJ* of bias against statins after a study claimed that scares about use of the drugs have led to thousands of heart attacks.

GPs should not automatically trust medical journals which “have an axe to grind”, said Peter Weissberg, medical director of the BHF.

Prestigious journals now spin data and campaign in order to sell copies and patients and doctors need to learn to stop taking them as “gospel”, he said.

Professor Weissberg was commenting on a study, published in *The* *BMJ*, which found that about 200,000 people stopped taking statins after a period of intense media controversy about their possible side-effects and benefits in protecting against heart disease.

About seven million people take statins to reduce cholesterol and almost all experts agree they save lives for patients at highest risk of heart attacks.

Recent NHS guidance, however, has advised that more people at lower risk be offered the drugs, and some doctors have questioned whether millions of healthy people should be taking a daily tablet from which most will not benefit.

“For high-risk patients there is no debate. Even the people most sceptical about statins would agree there is a benefit. The issue is where you draw the line between high and low risk,” Professor Weissberg said. While controlled trials have showed true side-effects of statins are rare, many aches and pains are attributed to the drugs that may not actually be caused by them, with some patients stopping treatment as a result.

The latest study looked at a six- month period in 2013-14 during which the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued new guidance and *The* *BMJ* published papers questioning wider use the of drugs which included a claim, now withdrawn, that 20 per cent of users suffered side-effects.

The following months saw an 11 per cent rise in patients abandoning statins, equivalent to 200,000 stopping their daily pill. This included patients at the highest risk and researchers estimated this would lead to at least 2,000 more heart attacks and strokes, more than a quarter of them fatal.

Liam Smeeth of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, an author of the study, said: “We are concerned that widespread reporting of the debate has given disproportionate weight to a minority view about possible side-effects. This has dented public confidence in a drug which most scientists and health professionals believe to be a safe and effective option against heart disease.”

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. 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.”

However, Sir Rory Collins of Oxford university said: “Instead of hiding behind the spurious argument that ‘debate’ is warranted despite having misrepresented the evidence,*The* *BMJ* should take responsibility for the likely harm it has caused to public health.”

**Bad medicine**

•*The Lancet*: published and later retracted the now discredited 1998 study linking MMR to autism.

•*BioMed Central*: withdrew 43 papers last year amid concerns over “fabricated” peer reviews.

•*Science*: Papers claiming to have cloned a human embryo were faked and were retracted.

•*All Trials:* This campaign group points out that half of clinical trials have never reported results.

•*Science:* reported that two thirds of psychology results could not be replicated.