

# Old foes return as distrust in medicine rises

A rising tide of suspicion amplified by social networks has eroded public trust in modern medicine, leaving scientists and health officials scrambling for ways to shore up its credibility, experts say.

The scale of scepticism is startling. A survey by the British Academy of Medical Sciences last year found only 37% of Britons trusted evidence from medical research. Two-thirds cited friends and family as more reliable.

A quarter of 1,500 parents polled in the US in 2017 believed that vaccines can cause autism in healthy children, despite a complete lack of credible evidence. One in ten had refused to give their offspring at least one vaccine. In France, meanwhile, more than 40% of adults have expressed doubt about vaccine efficacy or safety.

These opinions have consequences. Whooping cough, measles and mumps have all seen a resurgence in the US in the last decade because the number of parents refusing to inoculate their toddlers rose above the threshold needed to ensure what scientists call "herd immunity".

In France, health authorities were forced to take action: as of this year, any child that has not been vaccinated for 11 specific diseases will not be admitted to kindergarten or school.

Many factors account for this mistrust. Most damag-

## VACCINE VOX

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ing are a series of scandals involving inadequately vetted drugs, poor oversight and attempted cover-ups.

France was profoundly shaken a blood scandal in which nearly 4,000 people were infected with the HIV virus in the 1980s after receiving contaminated blood transfusions. In a recent survey in Britain, 82% of doctors and 67% of adults agreed that clinical trials funded by drug companies were often biased to produce a positive outcome.

A medical misstep of another kind was the publication in 1998 by The Lancet, a medical journal, that drew a link between vaccines and autism in children. When it was revealed that evidence underlying the claim had been falsified, the study was withdrawn and its author barred from the profession. AFP