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NYS Immunization Coalition
A project of the
American Academy of Pediatrics
District II, New York State



*New Yorkers
working together
to keep our
children healthy*

September 24, 2008

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OUR MISSION

The NYS Immunization Coalition is committed to working with private and public partners to educate all New Yorkers about the scientific facts and public health benefits of immunization. The Immunization Coalition's goal is to help keep all infants, toddlers, children and adolescents healthy by reducing the burden of preventable disease through improved immunization.

Congressperson Carolyn Maloney
1651 3rd Avenue, Suite 311
New York, NY 10128-3679

Dear Congressperson Maloney,

We are concerned about misinformation you may have heard at a recent briefing presenting the non-scientific, irrational proposals espoused by David Kirby, and the Age of Autism with regard to a supposed link between autism and vaccines. Vaccines save lives. Study after study has shown absolutely no link between vaccines and autism.

As pediatricians, teachers, nurses, child care providers and parents across New York State and in your District, we are very aware of the struggles that the families of children with autism face and the challenges that test the children themselves. In your position as a political leader, it is important that you have the information you need to support the science, the research and the continued work toward identifying the causes, triggers and evidence based treatment for children with autism and autism spectrum disorders.

All of the research, including the most recent and exhaustive study done by the Columbia University School of Public Health, has proven no link between vaccines and autism. And yet a few people, some of whom are making a great deal of money from the suffering and false hope of frightened parents, continue to beat the drum for this discredited position. Many others offer dangerous and unscientific approaches to "cures."

We urge you to stand with us against the forces working to bring irrational fears and "junk science" into the world of children's health. As you know, immunizations are one of our greatest public health victories along with clean water.

Childhood diseases that can kill and maim our children are just a plane ride away, and yet the anti-immunization groups continue to push for less and less protection for our children. Just this year the Centers for Disease Control reported the largest outbreak of measles in decades. New York was one of the states that experienced a significant outbreak of serious disease. You might also be interested in knowing that the measles that was imported into the US came, not from the third world, but from Europe and from Israel: Developed areas that are experiencing significant outbreaks of disease due to weak public health policy.

We highly recommend that you read Dr. Paul Offit's recent, very well reviewed book, Autism's False Prophets. We have included a review from The Wall Street Journal and an editorial from the New York Times.

We will be contacting your local District Office to schedule a time to come in and talk with you about this very important issue. We know you want to work with us to help protect the children of New York and the children across the country.

Sincerely,



Elie Ward, MSW
Co-Chair, NYS Immunization Coalition

Enclosures (2)

Charlatans to the Rescue

Wall Street Journal

By LINDA SEEBACH

http://online.wsj.com/search/search_center.html?KEYWORDS=LINDA+SEEBACH&ARTICLESEARCHQUERY_PA RSER=bylineAND

Ever since psychiatrist Leo Kanner identified a neurological condition he called autism in 1943, parents whose children have been diagnosed with the most severe form of the illness -- usually in the toddler stage, before age 3 -- have found themselves desperately searching for some way not to lose their children to autism's closed-off world. Unfortunately, such parents have often found misguided doctors, ill-informed psychologists and outright charlatans eager to proffer help.

Paul A. Offit, a pediatrician and the chief of infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, has gathered this sorry parade of self-styled samaritans for "Autism's False Prophets," an invaluable chronicle that relates some of the many ways in which the vulnerabilities of anxious parents have been exploited.

First, though, some basics about the disorder: According to the Autism Society of America, children and adults with autism "typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities." But there is a wide range of severity, hence the use of the umbrella term "autism spectrum disorder." At the less severe end of the spectrum, a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome is sometimes applied to cases where there is no delay in children's acquisition of language. (The Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger noted this milder form of autism in 1944, but it wasn't formalized as a diagnosis until the 1990s.)

For a disorder that has been noticed and described relatively recently, autism is quite common, affecting as many as one in 150 children. And the frequency of the diagnosis is increasing, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The natural reaction to such an increase is: "Something must be causing it." The next step is: "Someone is to blame" -- followed by lawsuits, if only people can figure out whom to sue.

Dr. Offit notes two likely causes of the increase in autism diagnoses. One is that the definition of the disorder has broadened over time, so that children with mild symptoms are now being diagnosed when once they would have been regarded as merely quirky. That's certainly plausible. My son, now in his mid-30s, sought a formal evaluation a year ago, just to satisfy his curiosity about whether he's really an Aspy, as those with Asperger's sometimes call themselves. And indeed he is. But when he started school three decades ago, and his teachers worried about why he seemed to have trouble making friends, no one so much as mentioned a neurological problem as a possible explanation. Today they would, and they'd also have more useful guidance on what might help him (he seemed fine to us, his parents).

The second cause of the rise in autism diagnoses, according to Dr. Offit, is that in earlier times children with severe symptoms of what we now recognize as autism were more likely to be diagnosed, often incorrectly, as mentally retarded.

Just as autism is being found more often, so, it seems, are dubious explanations for the source of an illness that so far has defied medicine's attempts to find its origins. The parade of "false prophets" began lining up soon after the disorder was defined.

At mid-century, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim set up a school in Chicago, and published a book, based on his theory that autism was precipitated by the "black milk" of mothers who treated children with a frosty emotional distance. His claims of successful treatment were widely disseminated; that the claims were fraudulent, not so much.

Next in Dr. Offit's parade are the advocates of "facilitated communication" from the 1970s and 1980s, who claimed that their approach enabled nonverbal children to express their true selves. Facilitated communication entailed having a "facilitator" support a child's hand or arm, helping the child type on a keyboard or use other devices. The method was easily debunked with a simple experiment: Don't allow the facilitator to see what the child is seeing and suddenly the child's communication skills evaporate. But facilitated communication flourished for years. Nobody thought to do the experiments until the children's true selves -- or at least their imaginative helpers -- began recounting false tales of sexual abuse.

In 1998, a British doctor named Andrew Wakefield joined the ranks of autism explainers, announcing in The Lancet that the disorder was caused by the triple vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) given to young children. Only later did it emerge that the children he studied were clients of a lawyer who was searching for evidence he could use in a lawsuit. The disclosure prompted most of the co-authors of Dr. Wakefield's article to disavow it.

The MMR episode seems like just a prelude to the American manifestation of the childhood-vaccines panic of recent years. As Dr. Offit reports, the autism bogeyman is now the use of thimerosal, a preservative in vaccines. Thimerosal, as many studies in several countries have shown, is safe; whatever may be causing the increase in autism diagnoses, thimerosal isn't it. But in an excess of caution, federal agencies pushed to have thimerosal removed from almost all childhood vaccines.

The government's action was unnecessary but in itself not harmful. The problem was that removing the preservative seemed to confirm parents' fears: If thimerosal wasn't harmful, why get rid of it? The government's action did have the useful side effect of setting up a natural experiment. If thimerosal had been a cause of autism, the appearance of new cases should have begun to slow. In fact, autism diagnoses continued to climb.

Of course, the evidence rejecting thimerosal as a cause of autism had no effect on true believers, whose ranks include distraught parents and those beating the drums for their own patented remedies. Dr. Offit wonders why parents who distrust scientists and public health officials for refusing to admit that vaccines cause autism -- after all, they don't -- "haven't been similarly skeptical of the vast array of autism therapies, all of which are claimed to work and all of which are based on theories that are ill-founded, poorly conceived, contradictory, or disproved." Good question.

September 9, 2008

Editorial

Debunking an Autism Theory

Ten years ago, a clinical research paper triggered widespread and persistent fears that a combined vaccine that prevents measles, mumps and rubella — the so-called MMR vaccine — causes autism in young children. That theory has been soundly refuted by a variety of other research over the years, and now a new study that tried to replicate the original study has provided further evidence that it was a false alarm.

The initial paper, published in *The Lancet*, the prestigious British medical journal, drew an inferential link between the vaccine, the gastrointestinal problems found in many autistic children and autism. In later papers, researchers theorized that the measles part of the vaccine caused inflammation in the gastrointestinal tract that allowed toxins to enter the body and damage the central nervous system, causing autism.

Now, a team of researchers from Columbia University, Massachusetts General Hospital and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has tried and failed to replicate the earlier findings.

These researchers studied a group of 38 children with gastrointestinal problems, of whom 25 were autistic and 13 were not. All had received the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella. The scientists found no evidence that it had caused harm. Only 5 of the 25 autistic children had been vaccinated before they developed gastrointestinal problems — and subsequently autism. Genetic tests found remnants of the measles virus in only two children, one of whom was autistic, the other not.

The new study adds weight to a growing body of epidemiological studies and reviews that have debunked the notion that childhood vaccines cause autism. The Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, the C.D.C. and the World Health Organization have found no evidence of a causal link between vaccines and autism.

Meanwhile, the original paper's publisher — *The Lancet* — complained in 2004 that the lead author had concealed a conflict of interest. Ten of his co-authors retracted the paper's implication that the vaccine might be linked to autism. Three of the authors are now defending themselves before a fitness-to-practice panel in London on charges related to their autism research.

Sadly, even after all of this, many parents of autistic children still blame the vaccine. The big losers in this debate are the children who are not being vaccinated because of parental fears and are at risk of contracting serious — sometimes fatal — diseases.

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/09/opinion/09tue3.html?_r=1&ref=opinion&oref=slogin