

Autism Research Review

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Reviewing biomedical and educational research in the field of autism and related disorders

Children's shots: no longer a simple decision

Once they were considered totally beneficial, a pure blessing. No more. Childhood vaccinations have increasingly come under fire as a possible cause of a host of problems, including autism. As reported previously (ARRI 4/4), Congress has appropriated funds to compensate the families of children hurt by vaccines, but the claims have far exceeded the available funds. Books and articles on the controversy continue to appear (see "For More Information," page 6). Recently the TV talk shows have begun to air the issue.

Speaking on national television, noted pediatrician Lendon Smith recently questioned the widespread vaccination of American children during early infancy. Smith's pronouncement was the latest salvo in a battle between public health officials—who believe that diseases such as polio and

Coulter charges that autism and other brain disorders can result from vaccinations. Public health officials say that serious side effects are rare, and that benefits outweigh risks.

whooping cough will return in epidemic proportions if wide-scale vaccination programs stop—and vaccination critics, who charge that immunizations are toxic and create more problems than they solve.

Smith, along with several mothers (including the mother of a child who developed autistic symptoms shortly after being vaccinated), appeared on the *Susan Powler Show* in February. Noting that he had advocated vaccinating children until recently, Smith said that study of the research on vaccinations changed his opinion. For one thing, Smith said, "all of these diseases [that children are vaccinated against] were disappearing before we got the shots." Second, he noted, "many of the kids we fully immunized still got the disease."

One mother on the show noted that with the exception of polio, most of the diseases children are immunized against are relatively mild. Other mothers noted that parents are frequently misled into thinking that their children will not be enrolled in school unless they are immunized, even though 20 states allow parents to sign waivers.

Smith and the parents on the show suggested that parents be given complete information about the risks of vaccinations, and be allowed to decide for themselves if immunizations are appropriate for their children. Smith does continue to recommend tetanus shots following injuries.

Several of the parents on the show cited research by Harris Coulter, who believes that immunizations—and particularly the pertussis (whooping cough) immunization—may be a major cause of minimal brain damage. Noting that the pertussis vaccine has a severe allergenic effect on laboratory animals, Coulter suggests that DPT vaccinations may lead in many cases to subclinical, allergy-caused encephalitis (brain inflammation), which may in turn cause autism and other brain disorders.

Coulter notes that vaccinations are given earlier in the United States than in any other country. Guidelines released in 1995 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention call for pushing vaccination schedules back even further: the new schedule recommends a hepatitis vaccination at birth, and multiple immunizations at two, four, and six months.

Smith also questions the early age at

which vaccinations are given, citing research showing that when Japan stopped vaccinating children younger than two years of age, the incidence of sudden infant death in the country dropped dramatically.

In 1994, Kathleen Stratton et al. reported, in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, the findings of their study on the relationship between vaccines and specific adverse events. The researchers found that "diphtheria and tetanus toxoids were associated with a severe allergic reaction known as anaphylaxis," "Measles/mumps/rubella vaccine appeared to be associated with anaphylaxis, thrombocytopenia and death from vaccination-strain viral infection," "polio vaccination was associated with death from polio vaccine-strain infection and polio in the recipient or someone who had contact with the recipient," and "HBV vaccine was associated with anaphylaxis." They noted, however, that overt reactions were extremely rare; for instance, only two documented cases of anaphylaxis resulting from the MMR vaccination, neither of them fatal, were reported over a 20-year period.

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Prozac found effective for Fragile X males, carriers; health concerns raised

A new study suggests that fluoxetine, better known by the brand name Prozac, may be highly effective in treating individuals with Fragile X syndrome.

In addition to testing the drug on males exhibiting Fragile X symptoms, Randi Hagerman and colleagues studied its effects on non-retarded females carrying one gene with the Fragile X mutation and one normal gene. The women suffered from depression, anxiety, and/or schizoid features, seen in many Fragile X carriers. The researchers report that:

—Eighteen females were treated, "with an overall response rate of 83%." Ten of 14 women who had suffered from depression improved while taking the drug, and "all patients who had problems with mood lability, panic attacks, and outburst behavior were improved." The researchers add that three of four female subjects suffering from obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and five of

six suffering from anxiety, also were helped. The treatment was effective both for females with normal IQs, and for several "full-mutation" female subjects with mental retardation or borderline IQs who exhibited aggressive or maladaptive behaviors similar to the male subjects'.

—Seventeen males with Fragile X were treated for physical and/or verbal aggression. Twelve of the 17 improved; eleven of those were rated as "very much improved," while one was rated as "somewhat improved." The researchers say that other symptoms in male subjects which responded well to treatment included mood lability, obsessive-compulsive behavior, hyperactivity, depression, self-injury, and anxiety.

"Interestingly," Hagerman et al. note, "fluoxetine was noted to increase verbalization and socialization in four of the affected males."

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