

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK/Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

Is There An Autism Epidemic?

Almost every day we hear the same question: "Is there an increase in the number of cases of autism?" The question has been raised repeatedly by parents, by professionals, and by researchers in the U.S. and abroad. No one knows the answer, at least, not for sure.

Among those who have raised the question is Sally Rogers, a psychologist at the University of Colorado Health Services Center, who writes, in the newsletter of the Colorado chapter of the Autism Society of America, "In my own professional experience, from the fall of 1981 until the fall of 1992, I had seen only two or three two-year-olds with autism. From the fall of 1992 to the present, I have seen or known of 15 or more. My colleagues in other cities are having the same experience. Why is this? We have no solid answers."

Is the increase real—does it reflect an actual increase in the prevalence of autism, or is it due to some artifact having to do with a greatly increased awareness of autism? Rogers goes on to point out some of the reasons which could account for an *apparent* increase of autism. For one thing, she observes that we have a much greater knowledge of how the symptoms of autism present themselves in very young children today, as compared to earlier years. Second, she notes, we have a greater appreciation for the wide range of symptoms that occur in autism, that is, a much wider range of children is being diagnosed as "autistic" nowadays, as compared to earlier times. Third, she mentions that we now have objective diagnostic tools, and finally, she points out, there is much greater sophistication on the part of many pediatricians who are able to recognize autism today.

Yes, it is certainly true, as Rogers and many others have pointed out, that the apparent increase in autism may be the result of increasing awareness and increasing sophistication on the part of parents and professionals alike. Certainly the film *Rain Man* brought about an enormous increase in awareness. And autism has been seen much more frequently on television in recent years than ever before, with some television series actually having autistic children among their continuing cast of characters. Additionally, some of the "magazine" programs have featured autistic children, such as the PBS *Frontline* show, *60 Minutes*, and *20/20*.

One of the largest databases on autistic children in the world is the one we maintain at the Autism Research Institute where, since 1965, we have been collecting our Diagnostic Checklists, Form E2. These forms have been completed by parents of autistic children from throughout the world. As of September 15, 1995, we had 19,822 cases. The first question on form E2 asks the age of the child at the time the parents fill out the checklist. "Answer: Under age 3" has been selected by only a small minority of parents, as you can see from the following table.

YEARS	% UNDER 3 YEARS	(# OF CASES)
1965-69	1%	(919)
1970-79	5%	(4184)
1980-89	5%	(4018)
1990-93	8%	(6785)
1994-95	17%	(3916)

Quite obviously, the number of young children who are being considered as possibly autistic by the parents has increased markedly.

We come now to the hard questions: do the above numbers reflect a real increase in the incidence of autism, or merely an increased awareness? If there is a true increase, what causes the increase?

I believe that the increase is real, and not merely an increase in awareness. The cause of the increase is certainly a mystery, but I have several hypotheses that I would like to share with you. None of these are as yet proven, but all are worth investigating:

1. **Increased use of antibiotics**, for the treatment of ear infections and similar problems. Ear infections are very common in young children. The usual treatment is to administer antibiotics. Even though, as we pointed out in ARRI 8/4, antibiotics are rarely effective against ear infections, millions of children are given antibiotics each year for this purpose. A side effect of antibiotics is the proliferation of yeasts, such as *Candida albicans*, which exude neurotoxins as waste products. If a child has developed normally for a time, then slowly began to develop autism after antibiotics were administered, the possibility should be examined that the antibiotics have caused a proliferation of *Candida albicans*.

2. **Vaccinations**. This is an even more controversial topic, but it must be considered as a possibility. There is increasing evidence that many autistic children became autistic soon after receiving mandatory vaccinations, especially with DPT, although other vaccines are also under suspicion. For many years this was a taboo topic, but in the past several years the question of vaccine safety has come out into the open, and there are now numerous parent organizations, both nationwide and local, which insist that the question of vaccine safety be subject to open debate. There are now at least 25 books on the safety of vaccines, most of which have been published in just the past few years.

3. **Pollution**. National attention was first directed at the possibility that autism might be caused by pollution when parent Lori Altbobelli was featured on the *20/20* TV program in 1992 as a result of her investigation of the large number of cases of autism in Leominster, Massachusetts, which she thought might be a consequence of the dumping of waste products from a plastics plant some years earlier. Since that time numerous other clusters, in various parts of the country, have come to our attention, although there has been no systematic attempt to investigate these problems.

Although the evidence is far from conclusive, there is reason to believe that if pollution is a cause of autism, airborne substances are under the greatest suspicion. Lori Altbobelli pointed out that the cases of autism she had identified in the Leominster cluster almost all occurred down-wind of the waste dump. I am aware of several other instances of apparent clusters of autism where the toxins, if pollution was the problem, were most likely airborne.

Recently I received a telephone call from the mother of a two-year-old autistic child in Maryland who told me that during her pregnancy she had worked in a newly renovated building. She and her co-workers were bothered with headaches, nausea and other problems, due to the fumes emanating from the new carpeting and other substances. The mother told me that she had recently encountered a co-worker who had also been pregnant during that same period, and her child was also autistic. When these two women went to a support group meeting for parents of autistic children, they encountered a *third* mother who had been pregnant in that same building at that same time, also with an autistic child! Coincidence? Possibly, but I rather doubt it.

If the prevalence of autism is increasing, are there any other conditions which are also on the rise? If so, perhaps they could shed some light on the autism question.

As it happens, there are a number of other conditions which also appear to be epidemics. These include hyperactivity in children (the manufacturers have had a hard time keeping up with the demand for Ritalin), childhood asthma, and carpal tunnel syndrome, a painful and disabling disorder of the arm, usually of the wrist, which is often called repetitive motion injury, and which is usually treated by surgery. As it happens, all four of these conditions have been shown in controlled medical studies to respond to high doses of vitamin B6! In the case of autism there are now 18 consecutive studies, conducted in six countries, every one of which has demonstrated significant improvement in a substantial proportion (about half) of all the patients given the B6. There are also, as I say, studies showing the effectiveness of B6 in the other conditions.

I had noticed this rather interesting phenomenon some time ago, and wondered if there might not be some toxic substance in the environment, perhaps in the diet or perhaps attacking the body from some other source, which greatly increased the need of some people for vitamin B6. Later, I was surprised to read in *The Doctor's Guide to Vitamin B6*, that Alan Gaby, M.D., had also considered this possibility. Noting the increases in such B6-dependent conditions as carpal tunnel syndrome, kidney stones, and PMS, Gaby, like me, speculated on diet and pollution as possible causes of an increased need for B6, in certain individuals.

There are many more questions than answers. What are *your* ideas?