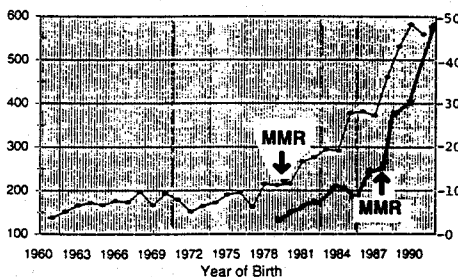


Editor's Notebook: The Autism Explosion

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"Rubbish!" That is what Bennett Leventhal was quoted in the *Chicago Sun-Times* as saying in reply to a reporter's question regarding my position. I had said that the increase in autism is real, and that vaccinations are a prime suspect as a cause of the increase (ARRI 9/3, 1995, 12/1, 1998). Leventhal, who is professor of child psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Chicago, says the autism/vaccine link is just a coincidence and "there is increasingly powerful evidence that this is a genetic disorder."

How ironic! "Rubbish" is what Leventhal's predecessor at the University of Chicago, Bruno Bettelheim, said in response to my insistence in the mid-1960s that *genetics* played an important role in causing autism! No doubt genetics *do* play an important role in *some* cases of autism. Neither is there any doubt, despite the strange skepticism of Leventhal and many others, that the prevalence of autism is increasing at an alarming rate in the U.S., the U.K. and elsewhere in the world (see graph). The only open question is the role vaccines may play as a potential causal agent in the autism epidemic. There is no plausible alternative to vaccines as the most likely cause. I have never heard of a genetic epidemic disease.



Rising rates of autism in California (long curve) and in U.K. (short curve). Start of MMR vaccination shown by arrows (CA, 1978; U.K., 1988). (Reference on request)

That said, let us look more closely at the vaccine issue, which has been presented to the public in a grossly distorted fashion. First note that the billion-dollar medical establishment, including the huge drug companies, powerful governmental agencies and medical schools, and most physicians, want us to believe that the vaccines are both perfectly safe and highly effective. Those, like me, who question vaccine safety are said to be wild-eyed radicals who want to abolish vaccinations. Not true! What I believe is that:

1. Vaccines are by and large effective, although not nearly as effective as their proponents would have us believe. (ARRI 12/1).

2. Because vaccines probably do more good than harm, vaccinations should *not* be abandoned.

3. Vaccines, as they are presently manufactured and used, do cause a great deal of underreported harm, including many cases of autism and other disabilities. Therefore, the production and use of vaccines should be conducted much more cautiously and rationally.

4. The link between vaccines and autism is far stronger than the medical establishment is willing to admit, and very careful and well-reasoned research is an urgent priority.

At this point you may be thinking, "Even though billions of dollars are at stake, I surely can trust the officials in charge of vaccine programs to look out for my child's welfare!"

Don't count on it. The conduct of officials on both sides of the Atlantic has been far from admirable. According to recent news reports, the British government ignored warnings from key scientific advisors for four years, and continued to use vaccines likely to have come from cattle with deadly "mad cow disease" (BSE). Under pressure from Parliament, the Department of Health reluctantly said it would issue a report—next March!

The situation in the U.S. is at least as bad. Congress requires records to be kept of the lot numbers of vaccines for which unusually large numbers of "adverse events" (side effects) are reported. But the information is then simply ignored. The "hot lots," as they are called, are not destroyed, but continue to be injected into infants and children. (No use throwing out expensive vaccines—dollars are worth more than lives, just as in the U.K.)

Both the U.S. and U.K. governments have laws requiring physicians to report "adverse events" when parents complain of a bad vaccine reaction. But in both the U.S. and the U.K., the vast majority of such adverse events are *not* reported. A telephone survey by the National Vaccine Information Center (a parent advocacy group) reported that 94% of New York State doctors said they would not turn in official reports when parents notified them of significant vaccine side effects. There are similar data from the U.K. Why? Perhaps because doctors are so convinced that vaccines are safe that they consider any child's bad reaction to be mere coincidence. Or perhaps the doctors are concerned about malpractice suits. Whatever the reason, the effect is to give vaccines a far better bill of health than they deserve.

Here in the U.S., the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is charged with both promoting vaccine use and evaluating vaccine safety and efficacy—a real conflict of interest.

The CDC is deeply committed to increasing the number of vaccines that young children receive—about 35 doses of vaccines are already given before the child enters school. The MMR vaccine is in particular highly suspect, in both the U.S. and the U.K. In the

U.K. there is a large class action suit underway by parents of vaccine-injured children. Asking the CDC to look into vaccine safety is like asking the fox to guard the chicken coop.

The CDC has been adamantly opposed to considering the possibility that vaccines may play a role in the causation of autism. Recently, at meetings in Brick, New Jersey, Dr. Jacqueline Bertrand, representing the CDC, stated that vaccines have nothing to do with the cluster of autistic children that had been widely reported in Brick. When she was asked from the floor whether any of the children had had blood samples drawn to determine their immune status and to find whether there was evidence of vaccine damage, she said "No." How could she possibly conclude that the vaccines were not implicated? Closed minds do not conduct meaningful research.

Legislation currently before Congress would allocate millions of dollars to the CDC for research on the causes of autism. But the CDC cannot be trusted to use the money allocated to it for the purposes Congress has in mind. A May 17, 1999 *PR Newswire* article reported that the Inspector General's office charged that CDC had used as directed only \$9.8 million of \$22.7 million allocated by Congress to study chronic fatigue syndrome. The rest of the money was used for other purposes. CDC official William Reeves, M.D., asking for whistle-blower protection, reported that 1.2 million dollars the CDC spent on vaccination programs was illegally charged to the chronic fatigue syndrome project on the last day of the fiscal year! Lying to Congress is a felony. Let the CDC study autism? No, thank you!

There is a good deal of evidence—none of it yet conclusive—implicating the MMR as causing the autism epidemic. The evidence includes both clinical research studies and thousands of parent reports linking autism to a vaccine—especially MMR. The medical authorities in the U.K., have responded by conducting several ill-conceived and poorly executed studies intended to mask rather than reveal the facts. These quasi-studies remind me of the fearful hunter who takes a few steps into the forest, hastily emerges, and proclaims, "There are no bears in the forest—I just checked."

Parent advocacy groups are not misled by the media blitz asserting that vaccines are so safe they do not need to be studied. They insist upon honest, effective research conducted by independent researchers and not by the likes of the CDC. Our children deserve better.

Dr. Neustaedter's excellent Vaccine Guide (260 pages) is available from ARI at \$17.00 (includes postage—CA residents \$18.22). Our ARI vaccine information package will be included at no cost.