

Autism Research Review

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

A quarterly publication of the Autism Research Institute

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

Major medical, political developments fuel furor over vaccines

The growing controversy over vaccine safety took a dramatic turn this summer as the issue went "mainstream," with national media, medical groups, and even the United States Congress calling for more investigation into possible vaccine risks.

The current furor over vaccines stems in part from a 1998 study by Andrew Wakefield and colleagues (see ARRI 12/1), who reported that the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccination may contribute to autism. (*Editor's note: DPT shots and other vaccinations have also been tentatively linked to an increased risk of autism.*) Since Wakefield et al.'s report appeared, a host of new concerns have been raised—some by the government itself—about possible vaccine dangers. Among this summer's vaccine-related developments:

- U.S. Representative Dan Burton, himself the grandfather of a child who developed autism shortly after receiving a diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus (DPT) shot, held a Congressional hearing on vaccine safety in August. "I'm not sure anybody in Congress is opposed to vaccines," Burton said, "but we want them safe. If there are risks, make sure the parents know about them so they can make informed decisions."

- On August 3, the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons called for a nationwide moratorium on mandatory vaccinations—and, in particular, the hepatitis B vaccine. "The Association... is deeply concerned," they said, "that federal vaccine policy results in the violation of informed consent, and is based on incomplete studies of efficacy and potential adverse effects of the vaccines." The group was strongly critical of school districts that require vaccinations in order for children to attend school, saying "Parents may give 'consent' to the vaccine under duress." Executive Director Jane Orient, M.D., said, "While we acknowledge that vaccines in the past have prevented many serious illnesses, they also have the potential to do great harm if given to the wrong individual."

- Also in August, all but two birthing hospitals in the state of Connecticut announced that they would suspend routine

hepatitis B vaccinations for babies under six months old.

- In July, the Food and Drug administration called on vaccine makers to phase out

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vaccines that contain the mercury-based preservative thimerosal. The U.S. Public Health Service issued a statement noting that it is possible, given the large number of vaccines given to infants, for babies to accumulate

enough thimerosal in their systems to approach federal limits on exposure to mercury.

- This summer, researchers reported in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood* that premature infants may be at increased risk of life-threatening apnea following vaccinations against DPT and HiB.

- In July, federal health officials called for the immediate suspension of the rotavirus vaccine, after the vaccine was linked to a potentially fatal form of bowel blockage called intussusception.

- On August 3, *USA Today* ran a major story on the vaccination issue, noting, "Never have American children received so many vaccinations: Most of the 11,000 babies born each day in the USA will get at least 21 vaccinations before they start first grade—more than twice as many as a decade ago." The article noted that advocacy groups have raised

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