

Coalition of law firms files vaccine lawsuits

A coalition of law firms, representing families in at least 25 states, filed lawsuits in October in an attempt to force pharmaceutical companies to investigate the suspected link between mercury-containing vaccines and developmental disorders including autism. The suits also seek to have any remaining stocks of mercury-containing vaccines destroyed.

Lead attorney Michael Williams charges that drug companies did not inform doctors about the amount of mercury in vaccines until Congress ordered the Food and Drug Administration to investigate the issue in 1997. "When they added it up," Williams says, "they were shocked to find out it was way above the safe level for an adult, let alone babies or very young children." (See related story on page 1.)

Williams notes that the mercury-containing preservative thimerosal was added as a cost-saving measure, so that the vaccines could be packaged in multi-dose containers rather than single-dose vials.

Redwood challenges AAP

In an October 1 press release timed to coincide with the Institute of Medicine report on thimerosal in vaccines, the American Academy of Pediatrics concluded that "parents should be reassured about the safety of vaccines.... Children should be immunized according to the recommended age-appropriate schedule." These remarks by AAP president-elect Louis Z. Cooper were criticized strongly in a widely circulated open letter to the AAP, written by Lyn Redwood, RN, of the SAFE MINDS coalition.

Redwood, whose child became autistic after receiving in one day 125 times the safe upper limit of mercury from thimerosal-containing vaccines, has become a national spokesperson for parents who insist that thimerosal-containing vaccines be removed from use immediately, rather than phased out gradually as planned by federal authorities.

Charging that the AAP statement is "directly misleading," Redwood notes that the IOM report actually admits that the hypothesis that mercury-containing vaccines are harmful is "biologically plausible," and that "the evidence is inadequate to accept or reject a causal relationship between exposure to thimerosal from vaccines and the neurodevelopmental disorders of autism, ADHD, and speech and language delay."

Saying that "thimerosal in vaccines is a serious issue which must be addressed with good science and accurate reporting of the facts," Redwood concludes, "Shame on you, AAP!"

Genome screen points to four chromosome regions

A new large-scale, international study implicates genes on chromosomes 2, 7, 16, and 17 in the development of autism.

Researchers participating in the Autism Consortium say their findings, based on

The researchers' findings point to genes on chromosomes 7q and 16p. In addition they found new evidence for autism susceptibility genes on 2q and 17q.

DNA screens of more than 150 pairs of autistic siblings, add further support for previous studies showing that genes on chromosomes 7q and 16p may play a part in autism. (The letters "q" and "p" denote different "arms" of chromosomes.) In addition they found new evidence for autism susceptibility genes on 2q and 17q. The strongest evidence of an association with autism was found for the regions on chromosomes 2 and 7.

Evidence from earlier studies also links chromosome 7 to language disorders. "Because of the size of this study and the strength of the correlation found, there is now little doubt that the so-called language disorder chromosome is significantly involved with the development of autism," said Marie Bristol-Power of the

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Anthony Monaco, a researcher involved with the project, says, "The discovery of these regions... both confirms the genetic component of autism, and will enable us to narrow our search down to specific genes and the functions they control."

"A genomewide screen for autism: strong evidence for linkage to chromosomes 2q, 7q, and 16p," [no authors listed], *American Journal of Human Genetics*, Vol. 69, No. 3, September 2001, 570-81.

—and—

"Autism susceptibility genes on chromosomes 2, 7, 16, 17," *UniSci Daily University Science News*, August 7, 2001.

—and—

"Researchers find new insights into the genetic foundations of autism," National Institutes of Health press release, August 21, 2001 <http://www.nih.gov/news/pr/aug2001/nichd-22.htm>.

Congressman Weldon calls for vaccine review

Another U.S. Congressman has joined Congressman Dan Burton in calling for a review of the possible health risks of vaccines.

Florida Congressman Dave Weldon, who is a medical doctor, recently said, "The federal government has a responsibility to parents to do everything within its ability to explore every avenue of possible harm that a vaccine may cause to children." Saying that he is not an opponent of vaccination, Weldon adds, "However, we should not consider the severe adverse reactions of a few children the price of doing business. We have an obligation to all parents to do everything that we can do to make vaccines safer for every child."

In particular, Weldon said that as a physician, he found the research of Andrew Wakefield, J. J. O'Leary, and colleagues, who have tentatively linked autism to the MMR vaccine, "most disturbing," adding that the epidemiological studies used to counter Wakefield's and O'Leary's findings are inadequate.

"I have been very troubled by public health officials trying to dismiss clinical research and laboratory findings with statistical studies," Weldon said. "We must get out the medical equipment and try and duplicate the research findings."

(See related stories on page 1.)

Autism heads list of new California DDS cases

Autism "is now the number one disability entering California's developmental services system," according to autism advocate Rick Rollens, who has been tracking figures released by the state's Department of Developmental Services. Cases of autism, Rollens says, are now "surpassing mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and all other conditions similar to mental retardation."

This marks a dramatic change since earlier decades, when autism cases averaged only about 3 percent of new entries into California's DDS system. According to Rollens, autism now accounts for 37% of new DDS cases—a 12,300 percent increase. Moreover, Rollens notes, 65% of the autism cases entering the DDS system are children 13 or younger, while only 4.5 percent are adults 42 or older. For other developmental disabilities, the percentages in each of these age groups is fairly consistent; for instance, 19 percent of individuals with mental retardation entering the DDS system are 13 or younger, and 27 percent are 42 or older.