

Editor's Notebook: Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

The deceitful Danish studies

You are a juror. The attorney for the defendant is addressing the jury:

"Mr. Smith falsely alleges that my client borrowed his car and returned it with the front end badly damaged. I intend to prove my client's innocence in three ways:

"First, I intend to prove that the front end was already damaged when my client borrowed Mr. Smith's car.

"Second, I intend to prove that when my client returned Mr. Smith's car, the front end was undamaged

"Third, I intend to prove that my client never borrowed Mr. Smith's car."

Obviously, when you are confronted with such glaring, blatant inconsistency you can have little faith in a person who makes such claims. His intent is clearly to deceive.

Now consider the two widely publicized recent studies which purport to deny any link between autism and vaccines. Both were intended to deceive rather than inform.

Both studies were conducted in Denmark and both were published in prestigious U.S. medical journals, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Pediatrics*. Both studies were so badly flawed that they should never have been published, and undoubtedly would not have been published, if the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Pediatrics* were not so heavily subsidized by advertising revenues from the large drug companies which manufacture the vaccines.

The first Danish study (see ARRI 16/3), which purported to show that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism, had many shortcomings, but the most blatant was the author's failure to mention that Denmark had since 1992 outlawed the use of thimerosal, a harmful mercury-containing preservative in vaccines, while the autistic children included in the study were born subsequent to that date. In the U.S., millions of children continued to receive thimerosal throughout the 1990s, when finally, in 1999, the drug companies were requested, not ordered, to phase out, not withdraw, the mercury-containing vaccines. Thus the population of Danish children in the study differed in a very important respect from the U.S. children to whom the results of the study were being applied. The Danish researchers appeared to be quite oblivious of the critically important role that many U.S. researchers believe mercury plays in injuring the G.I. tract and in disabling the immune system, thus making the vaccinated children highly susceptible to damage from the live viruses in the vaccines.

Curiously, the authors also seemed to be oblivious to the many clinical laboratory studies, such as those by Wakefield, Singh and others, showing clear and significant vaccine-related differences between autistic children and non-autistic children, using blood and bi-

opsy samples. Do you believe that they were unaware of this body of work and that is why they ignored it when they falsely concluded that their census type study had ruled out a vaccine/autism connection? (For a recent review of the clinical laboratory evidence, see Rimland B and McGinnis W, "Vaccines and autism," *Laboratory Medicine*, Vol. 9, No. 33, Sept. 2002, 708-717.)

Now consider the second Danish study. The authors, who had not thought the mercury issue to be even worth mentioning in their first study, suddenly became keenly aware of how important it is. They now claim to have discovered an epidemic of autism among Danish children starting in the mid-1990s, after the mercury had been removed from the vaccines, and thus exonerating mercury as the cause of the epidemic. However, the "epidemic" they claimed to have found is not an epidemic at all but rather an obvious example of cooking the statistics. The "pre-epidemic" cases were children who had been admitted as inpatients in psychiatric institutions, while the "epidemic" started when they began to count children who were not inpatients at all but rather children whose parents had taken them to outpatient clinics — obviously a much larger number. There were about 13 times as many children who had been taken to the outpatient clinics in the late '90s as had been admitted to inpatient settings in previous years. This isn't comparing apples and oranges, it is much more like comparing cherries to watermelons.

You may be wondering why formerly respectable medical journals would publish such obvious nonsense. One answer is that selling vaccines is a profitable business. Another answer is that they are conditioning the public who may serve as jurors in the parents v.s. drug companies class action lawsuits which are beginning to reach the courts.

Perhaps you've also wondered about those ads in magazines and on television which urge you to "Ask your doctor about Celebrex" or Vioxx or Allegra or.... You must wonder, "Do these ads really sell Celebrex, Vioxx, and Allegra?" Perhaps they do, but there is another, much more nefarious reason for those ads—the millions of dollars the media receives for that splashy print or television advertising gives the drug companies major clout in determining what "news" the public will see. If the newspapers, magazines, TV networks and medical journals want to continue to receive those millions of dollars, they know they had better keep publishing headlines like "MMR-Autism Link Disproven" and not "Vaccines Responsible for Autism Epidemic."

A vigorous campaign attempting to convince the public that vaccines do not cause autism is now underway in the media, before the issue reaches the courts. The intent is

obviously to influence potential jurors so that they will be predisposed to disbelieve the evidence against vaccines. For decades the tobacco industry kept vigorously denying the smoking/lung cancer link, just as today the drug companies deny the vaccine/autism link. Researcher Steven Bishofsky investigated the potential impact of advertising dollars on what the periodicals allowed to be published. He contacted numerous magazines to find whether they would accept anti-smoking advertisements. The results of his study were very clear: Their decision on what to accept depended very strongly upon whether they accepted ads from cigarette companies. They are very willing to allow advertising dollars to influence what does or does not appear in their medical journals, or on your television screens or in newspapers and magazines.

Concerns about the influence of advertisers on media content are not merely theoretical. A few years ago an editor of a highly prestigious medical journal resigned in protest over the journal's policy of accepting articles with positive findings about advertisers' drugs, while rejecting negative reports.

Critiques of the integrity-deficient Danish study began appearing on the Internet even before that strange second study had been formally published. *Pediatrics* was quickly, and appropriately, faulted for failing to acknowledge its conflict of interest in publishing the study, which benefitted the drug companies who spend millions of dollars for ads in *Pediatrics*. Lenny Schafer, the intrepid editor of the Internet-based *Schafer Autism Report* (<http://home.sprynet.com/~schafer>), reported that *Pediatrics* quickly deleted its list of advertisers from its website when the conflict of interest issue was exposed. The truth can hurt!

Unfortunately, despite its profound flaws, the second Danish study was given credibility by respected publications. The *New York Times* headline read, "Study casts doubt on theory of vaccines link to autism" (September 4, 2003). The *Science* story was titled, "Vaccine-autism link dealt blow" (September 12, 2003). It is an uphill battle.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest recently held a conference on corporate influence on scientific research and public policy. CSPI director Michael Jacobson observed, "The corporate world seeks to influence science and science policy at many different levels from the sponsorship and design of university research to the creation of scientific journals; from placing sympathetic scientists on federal and international advisory committees to generating publicity in the mass media; from influencing major health charities to creating their own friendly nonprofit organizations."

The corporate world's attempts to discredit the autism/vaccine connection are, sad to say, a perfect example of what Jacobson warns against.