

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

Institute of Medicine now says autism-mercury link "biologically plausible"

Saying that it is "biologically plausible" that mercury-containing vaccines could increase the risk of autism and other developmental disorders, an October 2001 report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM)—which advises the U.S. government on health issues—is now recommending that physicians avoid administering vaccines containing the mercury-laden preservative thimerosal, unless vaccines free of the substance are unavailable.

The IOM's recommendation stems from a July 16 meeting at which researchers presented evidence indicating that mercury exposure may be linked to the escalating incidence of autism. Although manufacturers have stopped adding thimerosal to vaccines—an action taken following an admission by the federal government that the levels of mercury in the recommended schedule of childhood vaccines exceeded safe levels—existing stockpiles of thimerosal-containing vaccines still are being used.

The July 16 meeting that led to the IOM's recommendations included an admission by Neal Halsey, M.D., of Johns Hopkins University, that a "discrepancy" led to scientists failing to recognize that children were receiving potentially toxic amounts of mercury in vaccinations. Halsey said that he and others involved in setting vaccine policy reacted with "surprise and initial disbelief" when shown the data. "Why those of us involved in vaccines missed this, I think, was primarily because the package labeling includes thimerosal as a concentration, .01 percent, which in my mind and many other people's mind, this is a trace, trivial, insignificant amount," Halsey told the IOM hearing. "But the guidelines for mercury exposure [with] which I did have some familiarity were in micrograms of mercury. That discrepancy contributed to some of the problem.

"I believe that if the labeling had included the dose in micrograms, someone would have picked this up earlier than it was picked up," Halsey added. "There is no doubt in my mind about that. I feel badly that I didn't pick it up."

Advocacy groups which have pressured the government to examine the suspected connection between vaccines and autism welcomed the IOM's call for more research into vaccine safety. "This IOM report confirms

the obvious: mercury is bad for you and we shouldn't be injecting our babies with it," said Barbara Loe Fisher, president of the National Vaccine Information Center. Sallie Bernard of Safe Minds, a coalition of parents and professionals concerned about children's exposure to mercury, says the report is a good first step but calls for more aggressive action in removing existing thimerosal-containing vaccines from the shelves. "We believe that no child should get any mercury-containing vaccines," says Bernard. "We are renewing our call for the

immediate removal of remaining stocks of childhood thimerosal-containing vaccines still on pharmaceutical and pharmacists' shelves. In addition, we are asking that research be conducted into how to identify and repair mercury damage in children." Physician Jim Laidler, who has two autistic children, agrees, saying, "It seems strange that we're taking mercury out of thermometers and not out of vaccines."

The complete text of the July 16, 2001 IOM meeting is available at the Institutes of Medicine web site, www.iom.edu.

Retraction due... by whom?

As the lead story on this page shows, the Institute of Medicine's newly-released (October 1, 2001) report reveals the IOM to be retreating from its staunch "vaccines are perfectly safe" position. The following exchange of letters pertains to the report the IOM released in May, 2001, which was presented as rejecting a measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) link to autism:

July 25, 2001

Dear Dr. Rimland:

Your editorial in the newsletter *Autism Research Review International*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2001, makes serious and disturbing accusations of the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences in regard to our recent report on the MMR vaccine and autism.

Due to the need to make the report publicly available as rapidly as possible, we issued no press release at all. Our Office of News and Public Information sent to reporters only a simple announcement about the report's upcoming release at a public briefing.

In general, any substantive IOM documents sent to the media are written by staff of the Institute and by our Office of News and Public Information. The chair of the authoring committee reviews each press release to assure that it accurately reflects the intent of the report, as do I and Dr. William Colglazier, Executive Officer of the National Research Council. No other individual has any involvement with the process.

We ask that you publicly retract your statement, and circulate my letter to the subscribers of your newsletter. Thank you.

Susanne A. Stoiber, Executive Director, Institute of Medicine

August 4, 2001

Dear Ms. Stoiber:

I am responding to your letter of July 25, 2001, requesting that I publicly retract my recent editorial in the *Autism Research Review International* concerning the IOM report on MMR vaccines and autism. Let me instead suggest that you follow the advice of IOM member Professor Walter O. Spitzer: retract the report itself.

Dr. Spitzer, who has been a member of the IOM since 1986, wrote in a letter published in the *London Sunday Times* on May 27th that he is embarrassed by the process of the IOM report and urges its retraction "until the message has been clarified."

Dr. Spitzer is particularly distressed, as am I, by the remarks of the committee chairperson, Dr. Marie McCormick, at the press conference announcing the release of the report. He objects, as do I, to Dr. McCormick's "spin" on the findings of the report, which amounted to the "unsubstantiated exoneration of the MMR by one person."

The IOM suffers a self-inflicted wound. I think retractions are in order, but by the IOM and Dr. McCormick, not by me.

Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.